The background of the cover features a romantic scene between a man and a woman. The man, on the right, has long dark hair and is shirtless, wearing a white loincloth. The woman, on the left, has long dark hair and is wearing a red dress. They are facing each other in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The background is a warm, golden-yellow color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

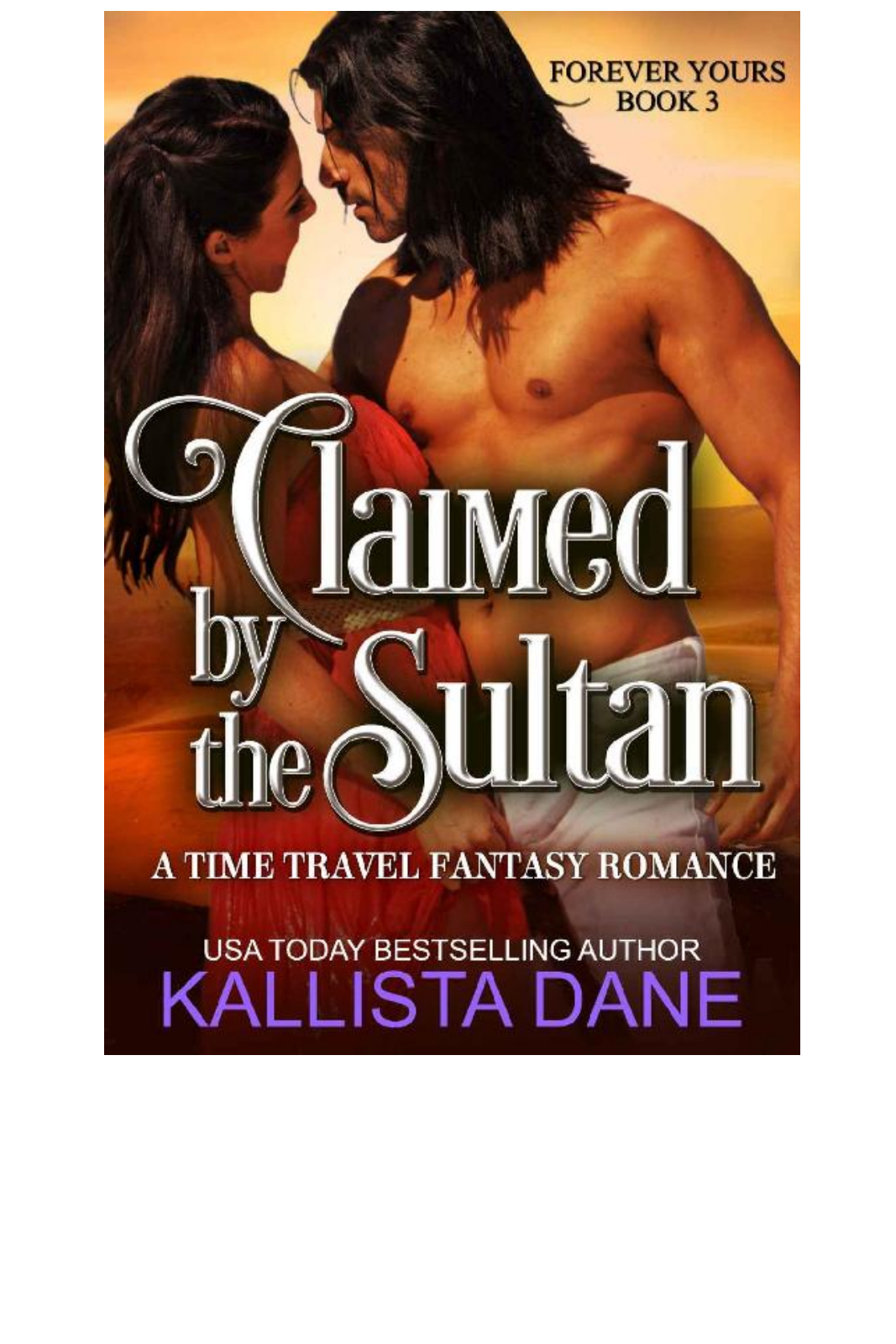
FOREVER YOURS
BOOK 3

Claimed by the Sultan

A TIME TRAVEL FANTASY ROMANCE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KALLISTA DANE



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Cover art by Fantasia Frog Designs

A huge thank you to Kate Richards, my exceptional editor

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The characters in this book were originally introduced in the novella *Judah's Bride*. This book continues their story.

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Prologue

She knelt in the required position – legs spread wide apart, hands clasped behind her back, upper body bent forward till her forehead rested on the thick carpet. Every secret of her most private parts was exposed – to be viewed, to be fondled, to be violated. Her luxurious mane of dark hair flowed in waves down her back and curled over her shoulders to veil her face.

The air was laden with the heady perfume of frankincense smoldering in an ornate silver bier. All around her, clay oil lamps flickered in the haze of smoke. Somewhere in the distance, a lone drummer began a strange but compelling rhythm. The drumbeats grew louder, as, one by one, the tribesmen joined in.

She could feel raw passion seeping into her soul as the tempo quickened. She was shaking all over, but not from cold, though she was nearly naked.

She dared not move. He would come very soon, she was sure. After all, this was the moment he'd been anticipating – preparing her for ever so patiently, even, at times, ruthlessly, over the long hot days and endless nights.

Kiera's eyes flew open. The ancient world vanished in an instant.

With a sigh, she blew out the candle scented with her special blend of essential oils and gently placed the fragile clay figurine she'd been holding back in the scarred mahogany box brimming with crystals and stones.

The shocking noise had snapped her connection to the past. A low groan coming from their private sitting area, a sound Reid would never have allowed himself to utter in her presence.

For her sake, he kept up the pretense that the latest experimental treatment was working. She didn't need her scrying mirror to know it wasn't. She could see the weariness and pain in his deep-blue eyes as clearly as she saw the lives they'd lived together.

But she couldn't bear to let him go. Not yet. Not again...

* * *

"My lord."

Reid's eyes widened. Keira had outdone herself. She stood before him wearing a bedazzled halter top and a gauzy flowing skirt. An opaque veil hid the lower part of her face more successfully than the nearly transparent skirt hid her feminine charms. Only her eyes were uncovered. Warm brown eyes, heavily lined with kohl, like the eyes of the Egyptian goddess in the framed papyrus fragment on the wall behind her.

She put an inlaid wooden tray on the table beside him then knelt at his feet. Taking up a long-necked copper pot that could have come straight from Aladdin's cave, she poured thick dark liquid into a pair of tiny enamel cups decorated with a stylized design of colorful flowers and handed him one.

He sniffed then took a sip. "Mint tea. The kind that's served in Middle Eastern bazaars. Have you been visiting your secret sanctuary again? Communing with the spirits – or whatever it is you do there that turns you into a wickedly seductive wench?"

"I've been...reminiscing tonight, my lord. About us."

"Really? I don't remember going to a costume party where you dressed like that."

She batted her long dark lashes. "No, my lord. I wasn't reminiscing about a costume party. This is what I wore the night I was forced to kneel before you as the newest addition to your harem. The night I refused to be your slave."

"Refused? How did that go over?"

She gave a low throaty laugh. "About as well as you'd imagine. There you were, a powerful sultan, faced with a defiant female who claimed to be a ruler in her own right. A queen. You threatened to punish me. But I threw down a challenge instead. One that appealed to your fiercely competitive nature."

He leaned back in his chair, drinking in the sight of her. To Reid, his wife of twenty years was sexier and more desirable now than on the day they met.

For many of those years, she kept dark secrets from him, hungers she'd never dared to confess. Only recently, through the stories she wove, had she begun to expose her most wicked desires. He found this

hidden side to the woman he thought he knew so well enthralling. Inside her lived a brazen temptress with hot fantasies – dirty fantasies that got his cock hard when she confessed them to him.

Reid smiled. If there was one thing he did know about his wife, it was that her competitive nature was just as fierce as his. “A challenge? Hmmm...let me think.” He paused then nodded his head. “Of course. You played the Queen’s Gambit.”

Her eyes lit up. “You *do* remember!”

It had been a lucky guess but he didn’t want to put a damper on her excitement by admitting that. Instead he responded with a raised eyebrow and a wicked chuckle.

Reid had no idea if Kiera truly was uncovering memories of past lives they’d spent together or whether weaving naughty tales of love and lust had given her the courage to be honest at last about her sexual needs. For him, it didn’t matter. All he knew was that he loved her more and more every day, loved the freedom her honesty had given both of them. After recounting one of her erotic adventures, she’d find a way to bring it to life, satisfying needs neither of them had ever dared to admit.

Through her stories he discovered Kiera’s most shameful secret. She hungered for the thrill of submitting to a stern alpha male. Reid was determined to give his woman what she desperately craved – for as long as he could.

She’d dropped enough clues tonight for him to come up with the perfect reply.

“How could any man forget the most alluring creature the desert winds ever brought to his tent?”

Chapter One

1936

“Doc, get over here! I just found the mother lode of ancient porn!”

Bree jumped up then cursed as a bolt of pain nearly brought her back to her knees. She’d been sweating in the hot sun for hours, sweeping grains of sand off a delicate temple frieze. Her back was in spasms, her throat drier than the dust she’d been clearing away. She felt dizzy and light-headed.

“Damn it,” she muttered. “If anyone should know better, it’s me. I’m always preaching to the interns about the dangers of heat stroke and reminding them to take breaks and drink plenty of water.”

Before answering the summons, Bree took a long gulp from her canteen. The water was hot and smelled like an unwashed camel, but everything here smelled like camel – or worse. Still, it soothed her parched throat. One more deep swallow then a few drops splashed on her face and neck, and she was ready. She tucked a wayward strand of long dark hair back under the brim of her straw hat as she strode along, her well-worn boots kicking up plumes of dust.

“Okay, Jess, show me what you’ve got.”

A cluster of grad students and white-robed local laborers huddled around the area she’d identified as the temple’s inner courtyard. Jesse stood in the middle of the group, holding out a handful of artifacts for her inspection.

Tiny clay figurines. Unlike the crude Neolithic fertility goddesses with pendulous breasts and wide hips that had been found all over Europe and the Middle East, these figures were more delicately rendered. And they were of both sexes.

The females had full breasts and hips. They were depicted in a variety of positions – some on their knees, others lying on their sides with one leg drawn up, a few on all fours with their legs spread wide apart. The male figures stood or knelt, their prominent penises jutting out.

Owen was playing with two of the figures, arranging them in different scenarios while the workers laughed and egged him on. Bree understood enough of the local dialect to blush at some of the comments they made. *Oh, great. Now he’s adding sound effects to the*

show.

“That’s enough, Owen,” she snapped, glaring up at him from under the brim of her hat. “Remember, these are sacred items, not dolls.”

“I would have played with dolls if they looked like this,” Owen replied, not the least bit chastised. He took off his cap and ran one hand through sun-streaked blonde hair, pushing it back off his sweaty forehead. “Come on, Doc, seriously. Have you ever seen anything like them?”

Bree took one of the figurines, turning it over and over. It seemed vaguely familiar; though she was certain she’d never run across anything like it in her travels. The storerooms of museums all over the world were packed with erotic artifacts and drawings considered too obscene for public viewing.

She’d had an opportunity to examine many of them over the last five years. In academic circles, Doctor Sabrina Dennison was as rare as the artifacts she uncovered, a female regarded as an expert in ancient fertility cults of the Middle East. She treated her subject matter with scholarly respect, never participating in the smutty banter many of her male colleagues engaged in when they were in a room full of explicitly pornographic images.

This find was exceptional. She’d never heard of anatomically correct male and female figurines found together on a site that dated back 3,000 years.

“The oldest fertility cults celebrated the female form, with stone or clay statues honoring woman’s role as the bearer of life,” she explained. “Those statues are known as Venus figurines. The earliest example is an incredible piece carved from the tusk of a mammoth approximately 35,000 years ago. Some of those statues...”

“Yeah, Doc, we’ve all attended your lectures, remember? That’s how we ended up here,” Jess interrupted. “What I want to know is – have you ever seen ancient statues that look like visual aids for the *Kama Sutra*?”

“The only ancient artifacts that come close are petroglyphs recently discovered in China,” she replied absently, turning over the

figurine in her hand. “The drawings are in a remote area and haven’t been fully studied. The few photographs I’ve seen show males with erect phalluses, some of them larger than the figures themselves. Sex between couples is depicted, as well as a variety of behaviors with multiple partners at the same time. Some drawings seem to depict intercourse with fur-covered creatures. But without further research, those acts cannot be termed bestiality, since they may be portraying a rite where humans wore animal skins.” Bree delivered the information in her usual dry tone, as though she were back in her classroom at the University of Chicago.

Jess chimed in. “So what you’re saying is that nobody has ever found statues like this in a site dating back as far as Sheba’s temple?” The young woman was giddy with excitement, bouncing around, mindless of the crushing heat that had sapped everyone’s energy over the past few weeks.

“Now, Jess, we haven’t found definitive proof that this is Sheba’s temple,” Bree admonished.

“I know, I know. You’re not willing to stick your neck out and declare this site as hers.”

Bree was stung at the casual criticism. “I’m a scholar, Jess, not some Heinrich Schliemann wanna-be. This find is significant, but so are the broken shards of pottery we uncover and the desiccated scraps of food we find in them. Whether this is the actual temple of the Queen of Sheba isn’t important. What is important,” she went on, “is the knowledge we glean from these finds, the picture we can paint of what life was like for the Sabateans.”

She repeated the words she’d told herself so often. But deep inside, Bree felt as elated as her students. Ever since she heard the story of Heinrich Schliemann and his discovery of the city of Troy, Sabrina had been hooked on archaeology. Before Schliemann’s find, scholars dismissed the Greek tale of Troy as a myth, another Atlantis. But he believed Homer’s account of the city and the famed Trojan horse was based on fact and set out to prove the city had really existed. His find changed history. Ever since, scholars had begun taking a new look at ancient legends.

Bree had been raised by her grandmother, who entertained her with tales from the past filled with romance and adventure. Legends about mythical gods and goddesses and snippets from *The Arabian Nights* became Bree's bedtime stories. She was especially taken by the Biblical tale of Solomon and Sheba. When she began studying archaeology, Bree discovered the story appeared both in the Old Testament and the Koran. As she researched further, she found ancient Ethiopian texts recounted a version of it as well.

According to those legends, 1,000 years before the birth of Christ there existed a fabulously wealthy kingdom in the southernmost part of the Arabian Peninsula. Its female ruler was known as the Queen of Sheba. Her country's wealth came from vast quantities of frankincense, a rare substance immortalized in the Gospel of Matthew when the three Magi presented it as one of their gifts for the newborn King lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

Bree was convinced the stories of the sensuous queen and her rich kingdom of Sheba were based in fact. Like Schliemann, she hoped to find irrefutable evidence that the legend's fabled treasures were real.

She chose the location of her dig, near the mountains of Jebel al Qamra, because it was the only place on earth where the trees that produced frankincense grew. If the Sheba's kingdom of Sabatea had ever existed, she felt certain it would be found there. Subsisting in clumps of rock that pass for soil, the trees still clung to barren cliffs overlooking the crystal-blue waters of the Arabian Sea far below. They thrived on the harsh climate – fleeting monsoon rains in summer followed by months of hot dry weather that baked the ground. Their bark oozed a fragrant sap that hardened into the prized amber-colored crystals.

As a Catholic schoolgirl, Bree was familiar with the pungent odor of frankincense. Her parish priest had burned it as he recited blessings over the coffin lying before the altar during every Mass for the Dead.

Devout believers in ancient times used frankincense in their worship as well, buying 3,000 tons of it per year from the Sabateans. They ignited it on funeral pyres, burned crystals as an offering to a multitude of pagan gods. Frankincense was to the Sabateans what oil

became to modern-day Arabs – a scarce commodity that blessed their otherwise hostile environment with riches beyond belief.

“Don’t be such a spoilsport, Professor.” Jess pleaded. “You know in your heart this is Sheba’s temple. And now everyone can see why Solomon went crazy over her. Just look at the statues. These erotic images are what she saw, what she touched, when she led them in worship. She was their high priestess as well as their ruler. One of them might even be a depiction of how she actually looked. This proves we’re in the place you’ve been searching for...the Great Temple where the Queen of Sheba performed her exotic fertility rites.”

“Let’s break for lunch,” Bree replied, ignoring Jess’s outburst. “We can study these finds in the shade of the tent while we wait for sundown.” Every day on the dig was broken into two sessions to avoid the blistering heat of the midday sun – one beginning at daybreak, the other starting late in the day and lasting till darkness fell. It took skilled archaeologists endless hours of crouching in the dust wielding trowels and brushes to bring fragile bones and pottery shards to the light of day centuries after the desert had claimed them.

The miserably hot afternoons were spent in the shade of the large work tent, cataloguing and examining finds. Measurements were taken, objects photographed from every angle, and copious notes made in sweat-stained notebooks.

Bree had chosen Jess and Owen to accompany her on the dig along with Alice and John, all graduate students from her Techniques of Archaeological Excavation seminar. As they walked into the tent, Alice looked up from the chart she’d been poring over.

“You found something at the site I pinpointed yesterday,” she stated before anyone said a word. “I knew you would.”

A pure scientist, Alice took more pleasure in figuring out the most likely locations of undiscovered artifacts than in the treasures her work helped unearth. Unlike the rest of the crew covered head to toe to protect them from the blazing sun, Alice wore thin trousers and a sleeveless grayish top. It had originally been white, but six weeks of hand-washing in the meager amount of water allotted for anything not connected to sustaining life in the desert left grit and sand

permanently imbedded in the fabric.

Bree didn't mind what her assistant wore as long as she stayed in the tent. Flaunting so much bare skin on the dig would have been considered an affront to the local Muslim workforce. Tensions were high enough as it was. Government officials had visited the dig a few days ago, warning that local tribes were protesting again. They resented the presence of outsiders, especially Western women, digging up their sacred lands and accused the team of stealing their treasures. Bree knew her time was limited. If the protests turned violent, their lives could be in danger. She and her crew would have to leave at a moment's notice. She was determined to make every second count.

"We're wasting valuable time, Jess. I will *not* make any definitive statement about this site until I've had an opportunity to examine all the evidence and artifacts back in the lab at the university. Now, help me measure and photograph these figurines so we can wrap them up to ship back to Chicago."

The dig had been given permission by local officials to send any artifacts recovered to the university for five years so scholars could study them with an agreement to return them intact to their country of origin. But it took a hefty donation from a wealthy patron of the university to a "cultural enrichment fund" run by the minister of antiquities to get that concession. Bree knew the approval was good only as long as the corrupt official maintained his position in the government. Bribery had been part of doing business for millennia in the Middle East and Bree was a pragmatist. If a palm or two needed to be greased to uncover and document an entire lost civilization, so be it.

Owen and John wandered in, laden with more of the tiny clay figurines. Bree began the tedious process of measuring each one. Then she documented it with photos from every angle and dry scholarly notes about its condition, including any damage.

She picked up one of the female figurines. Kneeling with her head lowered, long hair obscuring her facial features, the figurine was posed in a position of subservience. Knees apart, bare buttocks thrust up in the air. Though the statue was tiny, her exposed labia had been

rendered in great detail.

Fear and apprehension built in the captive slave. She had been commanded to kneel, naked, with her legs spread wide apart, and wait for her Sultan to punish her, then take her savagely...

Bree clutched the figurine tighter, shivering in spite of the oppressive heat. She took a deep breath and picked up a faint, vaguely familiar scent.

Bree shook her head. It was impossible. There was no way the clay figure could still bear the odor of frankincense after lying buried in the sand for three thousand years. She didn't know where the fanciful images in her mind were coming from. Nothing about the tiny statue told her it depicted a slave. It could just as easily have been commissioned by one of the temple prostitutes to advertise her charms.

Bree laid the statue down and chose another figurine, this one a male. He was on his knees, sporting a huge phallus. Bree did a quick calculation. Applying a ratio based on the image's overall body size, the erect penis would be approximately twenty inches long on a live male. She smiled, idly stroking the stiff protrusion. Based on her limited experience, the figurine definitely depicted a mythical being.

The team worked tirelessly, occasionally taking a break for water or one of the dry sandwiches that tasted like tinned mystery meat basted with sand. They all ate sparingly, knowing the Bedouin cook was busy preparing their usual evening feast.

Every night after sundown, the team had been presented with an enormous platter of stewed goat or lamb surrounded by rice and couscous simmered in exotic spices. The meal often included sweet chunks of dates or other tasty morsels they didn't recognize.

One night, the cook served what he said was a special delicacy alongside chunks of mutton. Owen helped himself to one of the roasted morsels but Jess passed, saying she wanted to take a closer look before trying them. She let out a shriek just as he bit into it, squirting what she later swore was eyeball juice all over the platter.

"Chow time, Doc."

Bree glanced up in surprise. The tent was empty, except for Alice,

who was stuffing her precious site maps in a canvas bag to protect them from the dust storms that sprang up with no warning.

“Where did everyone go?”

“They’ve been back at the dig for hours. You were so lost in studying those figurines, you didn’t even hear them leave. It’s nearly dark. The fire is crackling, and Abdullah has our meal ready. I don’t know about you, but I’m beat. It’s time to knock off for the day.”

Bree stretched her cramped muscles and looked around. Half a dozen statues lay on the tray in front of her, joined together in obscene poses.

“I told Owen to knock it off,” she muttered, annoyed.

Alice stared at her. “Owen didn’t do that. You did.”

“What!”

The young woman looked faintly embarrassed. “You’ve been playing with them for hours,” she said softly. “Rearranging them, talking to yourself, even humming and singing.”

“That’s not funny,” Bree snapped.

“I didn’t think it was funny either,” Alice replied. “In fact, you scared me a little. It was like you were off in some other world.”

“It must have been all that time I spent outside this morning without a break. Maybe I was having hallucinations brought on by dehydration.”

Alice nodded, though she didn’t look convinced. “I’m sure you’re right, Doc.” The young woman hesitated in the doorway.

“Go on, Alice. I’m fine. I’ll be there as soon as I put away my notes.”

Alice disappeared without further comment. Bree was thankful. She’d glimpsed her notebook. Other than a few lines scribbled at the top, the page was completely blank. “I must be losing my mind,” Bree muttered, then realized she’d been talking to herself out loud all day. “How could I have lost so many hours?”

Vowing to take better care of herself in the future, Bree hastily rearranged the figures into a single row on the tray. Refilling her canteen from a jug in the corner of the makeshift lab, she headed for the group gathered around a fire not far from their cluster of sleeping

tents.

Normally the quiet one in the group, John had taken center stage, treating the other interns to a scathing impression of the head of the university's archaeology department. She paused in the shadows, watching. John somehow managed to convey the essence of Dr. Jacobson, scrunching his muscular six-foot-two frame into the chronic hunched-over pose of the humorless academic. He launched into a falsetto-voiced tirade about the amount of money being squandered on another team's discovery of Paleolithic skeletons in Northern Spain.

"I hate paying for you people to prove you've discovered something important," he sniffed. "All you're trying to do is show me up. Just because I haven't stuck a shovel in the ground in the last thirty years..."

Jess was doubled over with laughter. "Now do Doc," she urged.

John's voice changed, taking on a dry no-nonsense tone. He stuck his chest out to mimic Bree's generously endowed chest and began pacing back and forth in front of the fire.

"Now, as you know, ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I've spent the last five years attempting to prove that Neolithic fertility cults were nothing more than brothels. Recently I found out the head of our economics department is the last surviving member of one of those cults. His firsthand experience of their erotic rituals would be invaluable, but I can't find a student who can stay awake long enough in one of his lectures to take notes for me."

"Very amusing, John," Bree remarked, striding into the clearing. The raucous laughter died immediately. Jess looked horrified, John stammered something between "Thank you" and "I'm sorry." Owen just laughed.

"Now that you're here, Doc, you can deliver the lecture yourself," Owen urged. "Tell us one of your really dirty ancient tales. You know, the ones you reserve for grad students. We've already paid our dues sitting through your boring introductory classes."

"John may be right about archaic devotions," Bree replied. Without realizing it, she began pacing in front of the fire, too, as

though she was back on stage in her lecture hall in Chicago. “Many scholars believe ancient temples housed both male and female prostitutes. It was common for devout pilgrims of both sexes to visit the temple, where some beseeched the gods for a bountiful harvest and others prayed to be blessed with children.

“Wealthy powerful men often took much younger wives in their old age, hoping for more heirs to carry on their line. Those women were often ordered to visit the temple. They were led to the altar and told to get down on their knees and pray for one of the gods to assume human form and fill them with blessings. According to ancient papyrus texts, impotent husbands could pay an extra offering to watch male prostitutes service their wives, peeking from behind the pillars surrounding the high altar.”

Bree’s voice took on a hypnotic note. “Imagine being in the temple on the night of the full moon when the ritual was performed. You’re standing in the shadows, or, if your offering to the gods is hefty enough, you’ve been given a seat right in front of the altar. The Great Hall is lit with hundreds of oil lamps attached to forty-foot-high pillars lining the interior walls.

“The air is heavy with the musky odor of frankincense smoldering in front of the offerings piled on the steps of the altar – bowls overflowing with grain, pots filled with honey and rare spices, statues in all sizes and shapes, many of them adorned with gold and precious jewels.”

She stopped pacing, her gaze focused on a point beyond the fire. Bree continued, describing the scene as though she was peeking out from behind one of the pillars in the sanctuary.

“In the center of the room, on a raised dais, stands an enormous bronze bull, measuring nearly thirty feet tall at the tip of his horns. His erect penis juts out, gleaming in the firelight. A carved stone altar underneath him, between his legs, is decorated with images of every kind of sexual act imaginable. The priests and temple prostitutes have lined up in front of the altar, waiting for the procession to arrive. It began at sundown, winding along the two-mile route from the city to the temple complex. They hear the music, faintly at first...flutes and

lyres and the somber cadence of drums echoing off the distant cliffs.”

“The male prostitutes, young men all, are nearly naked, their muscled bodies anointed with sacred oil. Some of them are already imagining the rites to come, their erections poking out from under short linen garments slung around their hips.”

Lost in the story, Bree fancied she could hear the faint echoes of music in the distance. As she went on, the sound grew louder.

Jess’s scream brought her crashing back to reality. “Run! Run for the tents,” she cried. “A djinn is coming!”

Everyone scrambled to grab their precious canteens, scattering plates and cups as they ran for cover.

Long before it was used to describe a genie with magical powers, djinn was the name given to the most dreaded curse of the desert – the dust devil. The team had already experienced one djinn, shortly after they arrived at the site. It was a mild storm, lasting only an hour. Even so, the tents were nearly ripped from their moorings by ferocious winds whirling like a tornado.

Dust devils could spring up in an instant, descending on an area with no warning. The Arab foreman of their workforce told them stories of djinns that lasted for days, swallowing up entire caravans. The storms moved through the vast desert unimpeded, their howling winds kicking up swirling grains of sand that cut through clothing and skin, capable of shredding hapless souls to the bone. Towering tsunamis of sand had been known to reach fifty feet in height, and powerful djinns could barrel across the desert for 1,000 miles before dying away.

John and Owen ran side by side, catching up with Alice as she headed for her tent. “Is Jess okay?” John shouted.

“She’s ahead of us.” Alice glanced back. The welcoming light of the campfire had disappeared, obscured by dark clouds of sand. “Where’s Doc?”

“She was right behind us.”

“I don’t see her!” Alice cried. “We have to make sure she’s okay. She’s been acting weird today.”

“Find Jess and get into a tent. Hurry!” Owen yelled. “We’ll go

back and look for her. It's too dangerous for you to be out here alone. Visibility is already near zero."

Bree had been slow to react, lost in her tale of a world long gone. By the time Jess's warning cries penetrated her brain, the storm was upon them. Eyes squeezed nearly shut to protect them from wind-whipped grains of sand sharp as shards of glass, she set off in the direction of the tents.

She moved blindly, both hands out in front of her as she stumbled along. Suddenly, a hard object struck the back of her head. Knocked to her knees, Bree closed her hand on a fist-sized rock hurled by the storm.

She struggled to get to her feet then collapsed at the blinding pain. The wind keened so loud, her eardrums felt like they were about to explode.

Cradling her aching head, Bree curled into a fetal position and closed her eyes.

Chapter Two

“My lady! My lady!”

Hands prodded her, shook her. Bree groaned and tried to cover her ears, curling into a tighter ball. But the high-pitched voice that accompanied the pummeling of her body was like a persistent buzzing insect, impossible to ignore.

She opened her eyes to glaring sunlight and a bolt of pain in her head so sharp she nearly threw up. Closing her eyes again, she lay still and took a deep breath, fighting back waves of nausea.

A strident cry rang out. “Praise be to all the gods. She lives!”

The voice was a jackhammer in her brain. “Please, please, be quiet for a minute,” Bree croaked. Her voice was hoarse, her throat so dry she could barely form the words.

Soft arms enveloped her. Cool water touched her lips. She drank greedily then sagged back as fingers probed her head, bringing on another stab of pain.

“You journeyed to the Land of the Dead, my lady,” the shrill voice declared. “So long was your soul gone, I feared the gods would never allow you to leave them. I will burn a thousand offerings in thanks for their mercy in returning you to our midst.”

I must have a concussion. I don't know whose voice this is or what she's talking about. Shading her face from the sun, Bree opened one eye, just a slit.

Green. Bright green. Everywhere. Bree closed her eye. “Obviously, I'm having some sort of psychotic episode brought on by my head injury,” she said out loud. “We're in the Arabian desert, not the Illinois cornfields. There's nothing green here.”

“What is this Illinois of which you speak, my lady?” The voice sounded confused. “Is it a place you visited while in the Land of the Dead?”

Cautiously Bree opened one eye again. Her skull felt like it had been cleaved in two by an axe, but this time she was prepared for it. She breathed through the pain shallowly, like a woman in the throes

of labor, while struggling to make sense of the sea of green around her.

She opened her other eye and nearly shrieked. A wrinkled face with deeply tanned skin grinned at her, inches away from her nose. Piercing brown eyes peered out from below a black headscarf, and the unmistakable smell of alcohol wafted from the creature's mouth with every ear-piercing syllable.

"Did my lady have many adventures in the Land of the Dead? Did you see Balek or Uncle Assim there?"

"What are you talking about? Who are you?" Bree muttered, her head throbbing. Would the old hag never shut up?

The wrinkled face crumpled. A high wailing sound came out of her mouth.

"Aiiiee! The gods of the Underworld have kept your soul and sent only your body back to us! Do you not know me? I am Shiraza, your abbayah and your mother's before you. Curses on the evil djinn who took you from us and cursed be those who stole your soul!" The old woman turned her head and spat on the ground three times.

Bree took another shallow breath. The air was heavy with the perfume of herbs and flowers all around her – clumps of mint and rosemary, tiny yellow daisies, lilies, and wildly colored flowers she couldn't even identify. Huge date palms studded the space. She heard the tinkling of a fountain somewhere nearby.

"Where am I?" Bree asked, then winced as the high wailing started up again.

"Aiiiee! We must sacrifice a hoopoe bird that he may journey to the Land of the Dead and bring back your soul."

The eyes in the wrinkled face narrowed, and Shiraza's strident voice dropped to a whisper. "Be mindful, my lady. Your enemies will jump at the chance to declare you unfit to rule. They lie in wait for the moment they can usurp your power. You must let no one know your mind is gone until we can wrestle it back from the evil djinns. I will inform your attendants that you are resting and praying in preparation for tonight's ceremony. No one can come near you until you are yourself again."

The old woman rose unsteadily from her knees, wincing in pain. “I will fetch Raheem to carry you back to your chambers, my lady. He can be trusted with our secret. Do not fear. I will protect you...as I have done since the day your mother put you into my arms as a squalling babe.” The woman who called herself Shiraza hobbled away, swathed head to toe in long black robes like the Muslim women Bree had seen everywhere in the Middle East.

Bree sat up gingerly. The pain in her head had settled into a rhythmic pounding that kept time with the beating of her heart.

She looked down and groaned. She was definitely having a hallucination. Instead of khaki pants, cotton shirt, and sensible boots, she seemed to be wearing a sleeveless flowing garment made of silky fabric in a shade of deep lavender. Her legs were bare, her feet clad in delicate leather sandals trimmed in a gold-colored metal. Shiny rings set with colorful jewels adorned her toes, and her toenails were painted deep red. *At least my brain came up with a hallucination where I look good. I could have been the old lady.*

Putting aside the pain, Bree tried to concentrate. She remembered the campfire, the dust storm, the rock hitting her in the head. That had been late at night, probably close to midnight. The sun was high in the sky, so she must have been unconscious for at least twelve hours.

She realized something else. She was thinking in English, but the words spoken by Shiraza had been in another language – a dialect Bree couldn’t name, although she could understand it.

Maybe I’m like the guy who got hit in the head and woke up knowing how to play the piano. Somehow I’ve activated a part of my brain that creates elaborate hallucinations, complete with their own language.

Shiraza bustled into view, trailed by a giant of a man dressed like a character from the *Arabian Nights*. He wore baggy knee-length white trousers. An open vest woven from strips of colorful cloth showed off the impressive girth of his chest. His dark skin glistened in the sun, and his head was covered by a black turban. Shiraza was chattering away, but the man ignored her.

He knelt in front of Bree, a look of concern in his deep-brown

eyes. "Your Highness," he said, bowing his head.

"I told Raheem how you slipped and fell, bumping your head on the stone pavement," Shiraza declared. "You need rest and quiet and a strong cup of mint tea...with a bit of my special medicine."

"Hush, old woman," Raheem replied, although his tone was gentle. "If her head is injured, the last thing she needs is your special 'medicine.' She'll be drunk after two sips and then her head will hurt even more."

"Ah, but it eases the aches and pains in this old body," Shiraza protested. "Surely a measure of it in her tea will do her good. I always gave you a rag dipped in my medicine to suck on when you were teething," she added, turning to Bree. "You slept like..." Her voice trailed off.

"If you're going to say 'slept like the dead,' it's as well you didn't finish," Bree replied tartly. "I think I've slept like the dead long enough for one day."

Raheem chuckled. *Apparently I speak this language fluently as well as understanding it.*

"By your leave, Your Highness," he murmured, scooping Bree up in his arms. He rose effortlessly and headed down the path, followed by Shiraza, who was still spouting orders.

Nice hallucination. This is like one of those past-life regressions I've always been scornful about. Isn't it strange that no one ever remembers a life where they were begging on the street or scrubbing chamber pots?

From her new vantage point, Bree could see much more of her surroundings. Raheem headed for a long stone building bordering one side of the huge garden. The whitewashed walls would have been blinding in sunlight, but they were shaded by a portico stretching the length of the building, with curtained doorways evenly spaced all along the way. Purple bougainvillea twined around carved columns holding up the tile roof. Square stone pavers in warm shades of apricot and honey covered the floor.

Raheem stepped onto the terrace. Bree was amazed at how much cooler it felt in the shade of the portico. Out of the relentless glare of the sun, she could finally open her eyes without pain spearing her

head.

She studied the man carrying her. He looked to be middle-aged, but he was strong as an ox. He strode along, breathing easily, as though she weighed no more than an infant. They stopped before one of the doorways, and Shiraza scurried ahead to pull aside the floor-length curtains.

Raheem carried her into a large square room with a high ceiling. The walls on three sides were made of stone the color of rich cream, adorned with frescoes of green fields parted by a winding river that emptied into an enormous deep blue lake. Herons and egrets balanced on impossibly thin legs in the shallows, while a herd of what looked like antelope grazed nearby. Palm trees and delicate flowers dotted the shoreline.

Behind her, a row of fabric-draped arches opened onto the terrace. From outside, the long white curtains blocked the view into the room. But from the inside, they were nearly transparent, allowing the occupants to enjoy the magnificent garden while shielding them from the eyes of those outside. She'd never seen a fabric like it.

The floor was made of blocks of mellow pink stone, polished until they gleamed. In one corner, a large statue stood on a raised stone platform. A female deity, she decided. The statue was surrounded by floral bouquets. Metal bowls gleamed like gold at the statue's feet, overflowing with exotic fruit and huge chunks of what she recognized as the rarest frankincense, a pale-amber hue that was nearly translucent.

Carved wooden chairs, stools, and small round tables were grouped here and there. Raheem deposited Bree gently on a piece of furniture shaped like a Victorian fainting couch. The frame was carved from dark wood and the seat upholstered in a woven fabric that reminded her of the Oriental rugs sold in the marketplaces.

But the workmanship far surpassed the simple rugs turned out by armies of children slaving away in Middle Eastern rug factories. An intricate design of colorful flowers and birds on the turquoise-blue center was bordered by a pattern of geometric shapes in a soft thick weave. Bree sank back, grateful for the comfort after hours lying on

the hard ground.

Shiraza had drawn Raheem into a corner of the room. She was whispering to him, darting nervous looks at Bree every few words. Raheem nodded. He came to her, bent down on one knee, and bowed his head before silently leaving the room.

“Raheem will send a servant with your tea. Then he’ll stand guard outside the door to make certain no one else enters.” Shiraza looked worried, but Bree could see she was trying hard to hide her concern by jabbering away. “My lady must rest. I will prepare your attire for the ceremony myself. When you are ready, your attendants can enter to apply the henna and kohl. These old hands shake too much to draw the elaborate designs required tonight.”

Shiraza fell to her knees alongside Bree, giving way to tears. “Oh, my precious babe, my lady, my queen! I pray that your soul will be returned to your body soon. You have a long journey ahead of you and an important task to fulfill. Your people depend on you.” She laid her head in Bree’s lap, sobbing.

Queen? Whoever Shiraza thought Bree was, the person was very dear to her heart. She found herself stroking the old woman’s back, reassuring her.

“I’ll be fine, Shiraza. Do not fear. But you need to help me remember. Who am I? And where am I going on this long journey?”

The old lady began wailing again. Bree was sorry she’d spoken. “Hush, Shiraza. Everyone will hear you and want to know why you’re making such a racket.”

The warning stilled Shiraza’s outburst. She stopped crying and wiped her eyes on the trailing sleeve of her robe. “You are right, my lady. This old servant has given way to foolish behavior. We must maintain the illusion that all is well. I will tell your attendants I was overcome with sadness. You are going away for so long, on such a perilous journey. Alas, I cannot accompany you. I must remain here, my lady, to watch over your kingdom. Raheem and I and your devoted royal guards will protect the throne and see that your cousin Qatif does not become full of himself and attempt to usurp your power.”

Shiraza stopped. A look of cunning came into her eyes. “Do you think it was Qatif who went to the evil djinn and bribed him to steal your soul? We can see that he disappears when next the moon is dark in the sky. I never trusted that man – or the Nabatean whore your cousin brought home who gave birth to him.” Shiraza spat again. Bree decided there must be a team of servants assigned to follow Shiraza around, judging from the otherwise immaculate condition of the stone floor.

“My soul has not been stolen, Shiraza. Only my memory from the bump on my head, and that I am sure is temporary. But I need your help. Will you pretend I am a stranger who has just arrived here? Surely you told me stories as a child. Tell me a story now...a story of this queen you say I am.”

Shiraza nodded eagerly. “Yes, my lady. I can give you back your memories. The evil djinn left *my* mind unharmed. I will weave a tale to bind your head together until your soul is restored.”

One of the long curtains was pulled aside, and Raheem strode into the room, followed by two young women barely out of their teens. They were dressed in short white tunics cinched at the waist with delicate beaded belts. Each girl wore her shiny dark hair in a simple braid that hung halfway down her back.

Moving silently in their flat leather sandals, they walked with bowed heads and downcast eyes, each carrying a silver tray. One held an ornate metal pot and two small cups without handles. The other was piled with covered clay dishes. The servants bowed then deposited the trays on a low wooden table near her seat.

Shiraza waved them away and started uncovering the dishes. Despite her throbbing head, the enticing odors roused Bree’s appetite. She suddenly realized she hadn’t eaten since she choked down that dry sandwich for lunch. Was it only yesterday? It felt like she’d been in this strange world for weeks.

Whatever her mental state, the hunger and thirst were real. When Shiraza held out a single red grape, cooing to her, Bree opened her mouth and allowed the nursemaid to feed her like a baby. The burst of juicy sweetness was a balm to her parched throat.

Shiraza nodded happily. “Try a morsel of this, my lady. It was always your favorite as a child – unborn lamb gently roasted, stuffed with figs and nuts from your garden and rice brought here by the caravans.”

The old woman fed Bree, tasting a bite from each dish before offering it from her fingers. Occasionally she frowned and pushed a plate aside, declaring it to be too spicy or undercooked. Finally, she stopped and poured a cup of the fragrant mint tea.

When Shiraza held it to her mouth, Bree took the cup from her hands. “I am capable of feeding myself,” she declared, taking a big gulp to prove her point.

She nearly choked. The drink seemed to be made up of equal amounts of honey and crushed mint leaves. Bree shuddered at the cloying sweetness then watched in amusement as Shiraza surreptitiously reached inside her voluminous robes and pulled out a goatskin flask. The old lady poured a generous splash of whatever was in the flask into her cup. She slurped noisily then followed up with a loud belch.

“Aaah, there’s nothing like mint tea and honey, fresh from the bounty of our garden. Lie back and rest, my lady, while I spin a tale for you...a tale of adventure and intrigue, with a wicked djinn, a beautiful queen, and the wise-and-faithful abbayah who watched over her.”

Bree closed her eyes and allowed the quavering voice to carry her away from the waves of pain bombarding her head.

“Praise and glory be to the gods,” Shiraza began. “There was once an evil king who ruled this land. Our people suffered greatly, for he demanded the greatest share of their crops, the firstborn of their lambs and goats, the most beautiful of their daughters, and the strongest of their sons – all to be given to him as tribute. The crops filled his belly in daily feasting or were traded for the rarest of goods from the caravans that passed through the kingdom. The young men he kept as slaves and the virgins...they were taken by him at his whim then spent the remainder of their days languishing forgotten in his harem. Occasionally he gave one away to garner favor with a friend.

The unluckiest were offered to the soldiers of his enemies in exchange for turning against their rulers and joining his vast army. His people beseeched the gods to rid them of this wicked king.

“From out of the desert one day there appeared a beautiful young woman, traveling alone on foot. She strode across the sand, her fine robes of silk and linen billowing in the wind. As she approached the city of Mahrib, messengers met her and invited her to the palace. The king had been told of her arrival and he was curious to see this female who braved the desert with neither camel nor companion.”

Shiraza’s voice took on a singsong note as she told the tale of Bilquis, the female djinn. She brought the characters to life – the same characters in the legends Bree had heard from her grandmother.

Shiraza explained Bilquis had used her magical powers to harness the wind and travel effortlessly across the desert. She had heard the prayers of the people, taken human form, and come to Mahrib. How she was wooed by the king, wed to him, and then lay with him, bearing a girl child. And how a great dust storm sprang up, raging through the palace on the day their girl child was born. The evil king was swept away by the whirling sands, never to be seen again.

“The girl child was your grandmother, Queen Shaitar. Daughter of a king and a magical djinni. When she grew up, she disbanded the army and sent the men home to fight no more. Shaitar ruled the land with love and kindness. It was she who traveled to a far-off palace to meet the great and wise ruler Solomon. Upon returning from her long journey, Shaitar gave birth to twins – a son Menelek and a daughter Rahina. When he became a man, Menelek was given a kingdom of his own by his wealthy father Solomon. Rahina, like her mother before her, became our ruler, the Queen of Sheba.”

Shiraza’s voice was getting hoarse. She stopped and took a gulp from the goatskin flask.

“I was barely more than a child when I came to the palace to serve Queen Shaitar. When she returned from the city of Solomon, she placed Rahina in my arms herself, and I became both nursemaid and big sister to her. By the goodness of Queen Shaitar, I was educated along with her daughter. Years later, I traveled with Rahina in the

caravan when she, too, made the perilous journey to the Great Temple of Solomon to pay homage to her father. He had chosen a husband for her, as is the custom of his people. The day Rahina gave birth, she put her baby girl in my arms, and I swore to protect and serve her as I did her mother and grandmother before her.

“That baby girl was you, Bilquis, named for your blessed ancestor. You are the daughter of Rahina, Queen of Sheba. Your grandfather was King Solomon, and your great-grandmother, whose namesake you are, was the magical djinni who saved the people of this land.”

Bree stared at the old woman in amazement. Everything seemed so real. Did people actually create entire life stories and live them during a hallucination? Did they drink and taste food? *I know the story of Sheba. My mind could be creating this elaborate fantasy from my years of research. Menelek is in the tales as well, but where did this character Rahina come from? She's not in any of the stories or legends, not in the Bible or the Koran or the Ethiopian sacred texts.*

Trying to make sense of it all hurt too much. Bree groaned and closed her eyes, deciding for the time being she would play along with the scene unfolding in front of her. Shiraza began stroking her hair, crooning a tune that sounded vaguely familiar.

“Sleep little Bilquis, sleep...sleep...sleep.

Red is the moon and the night so deep.

Off in the desert the wild wind sings...”

She relaxed, humming along, and let herself drift off.

When Bree woke, the sun was nearly gone. Beyond the walls of the garden, streaks of purple and red filled the western sky above the silhouette of the Jebel al Qamra Mountains. She stretched and yawned. Thankfully the pain in her head had subsided to a dull ache. Shiraza was snoring, curled up at the foot of the chaise like a faithful old hound.

Bree slipped off the chaise and took advantage of her first moments of solitude to prowling around the room. The frescoes were magnificent. She ran her fingers lightly over one of them. She recognized ochre and kohl, but the bright jewel-colored pigments the

artist used were new to her.

The large statue drew her to the corner of the room. Carved from a solid block of wood, it was over five feet tall, standing on an ornate stone base that raised it another two feet. While she slept, someone had lit the bowl of frankincense at the statue's feet. It gave off its distinctive fragrance as it smoldered, filling the air with a faint haze of smoke.

The chunks of incense glowed from within, shimmering against the highly polished metal bowl. Surely, it couldn't be gold? Bree examined the drawing etched on the surface. She recognized the figure depicted on the bowl – a woman kneeling, legs spread, head bent to touch the floor, buttocks thrust high in the air. It was the same pose on one of the fertility cult figurines her team uncovered at the temple site.

Bree took a closer look at the statue towering over her. A delicately rendered female deity, nearly nude save for stylized yellow hibiscus flowers painted on its lush breasts. Massive rubies cut to resemble erect nipples had been inserted into the wood at the center of each flower. A wide girdle of pearls and precious gems on strands of gold hung low around the full hips.

The figurine stood with her feet apart, one leg slightly cocked. Her left hand was outstretched, palm up, fingers curled as if beckoning to a lover, while the right was nestled between her legs. Bree was shocked to see that hand spreading the labia apart. Where the clitoris would have been, a massive pear-shaped diamond peeked out from between the splayed fingers.

The eyes of the statue were closed, the lips parted, the face frozen in an expression that could only be described as a moment of pure passion – a woman experiencing the height of her feminine power.

In all her research, Bree had never seen a more powerfully erotic depiction of the female form. She stared, transfixed.

Sensing movement, she turned to see Shiraza had awakened and come up behind her. The old nursemaid spoke in a hushed voice.

"It is she, Bilquis. The ancestor for whom you are named. It is written that she transformed this nation after the evil king

disappeared, turning the men from fierce warriors into great lovers. Our women learned the arts of seduction from her. They became as goddesses, worshipped by the men, each at her own hearth. In Bilquis's honor, the entire kingdom gathers at the Great Temple every year on the night of the last full moon before the harvest, to be led in a sacred ceremony by the high priestess."

"The high priestess!" Bree forgot for a moment she'd decided this was an elaborate dream produced by her injured brain. "I'll be able to see an ancient fertility rite performed right in front of me, instead of struggling to reconstruct the details from scraps of papyrus and broken figurines. It's the opportunity of a lifetime! This high priestess," she went on, turning to Shiraza, "will she be at tonight's ceremony?"

Shiraza's face crumpled. "Oh, my lady! I had hoped..."

"What is it, Shiraza?"

The old woman shook her head sadly. "I had hoped after food and rest you would be restored to yourself again. But alas, it is not the will of the gods."

"What do you mean?"

Shiraza met her eyes. "My lady, *you* are the high priestess."

Bree stared at her in horror. "*I'm* supposed to lead the ceremony tonight? Doing what, exactly?"

Shiraza shook her head, muttering to herself. "We may be able to get away with it...she only has the one prayer to chant aloud. The temple priests can conduct the ceremony. She'll claim she is testing them, to see how well they will perform in her absence..."

She straightened her frail shoulders and faced Bree, her voice firm. "You must do *exactly* as I say tonight, my lady. Your life – and the future of this kingdom – depend upon it."

Chapter Three

Bree was stunned. There was no doubt in her mind the old woman meant every word.

“My life? The future of the kingdom? Shiraza, you’re being melodramatic.”

Shiraza looked worried. “I do not know what that word means, my lady. You must be cautious when you address everyone else. We can explain away some things, but if the temple priests discover your soul has left your body, they will run and tell the tale to Qatif. With your journey beginning at dawn, he will waste no time gathering his Nabatean cohorts to the palace in your absence. He dreams of the day he can strip away your power and take over the vast riches of this kingdom for himself.”

I’m in this, whether it be dream or delusion. I might as well play it out and see where it leads.

“Very well, Shiraza. I will do as you say.”

The old woman’s body sagged with relief. “Come, my lady, it is time. The attendants have drawn your bath. While you are being prepared, I will sing the prayer with you over and over, until you know it.”

Shiraza ushered Bree through a door near the statue of Bilquis into a luxurious marble bath lit with dozens of oil lamps. In the center of the room, a six-foot-square pool of water stood on a raised platform.

The old woman came up behind Bree and pulled the lavender gown over her head. Bree wasn’t used to being naked in front of anyone, and she automatically covered her breasts with one arm and the curly patch of hair between her legs with the other.

“Tsk, ts. Have I not seen you unclothed for the whole of your life?” Shiraza ignored her embarrassment and practically shoved her queen into the pool. The water, around three feet deep, felt blessedly cool after the heat of the day. Bree sank to her knees, closed her eyes and leaned back, immersing her aching head in the water.

Her eyes popped open when fingers began softly massaging her scalp. Two women had come into the room soundlessly. Both were dark-skinned, naked, with firm full breasts and narrow waists swelling into curvy hips. They had long black hair hanging down their backs and the same hauntingly beautiful dark eyes as Raheem.

One of the women crouched behind Bree, cradling her head and gently rubbing a scented potion into her hair. The other knelt off to the side and poured water from a silver pitcher over her head to rinse it away. They helped her to a standing position and began washing her all over, rubbing the potion on her body with their bare hands. Bree tried to resist when she felt fingers invading the folds between her legs, but a sharp glance from Shiraza stopped her.

“It is time to rehearse the prayer for tonight, my lady,” Shiraza announced in a loud voice. “I will sing it to you, and then we will sing it together, as we have done since you were a child.”

Shiraza drew herself to her full height, spread her arms wide, and began chanting. Gone were the shrill, quavering tones of an old lady. Her voice sounded deep and strong. For the first time, Bree could see beyond the wrinkled skin to the beautiful woman she had once been.

Bree found herself humming along with the melody as she had with the lullaby Shiraza crooned earlier. It was as if her subconscious mind already knew the songs. The refrain rose and fell, pouring over her like the soothing water of the bath. Insistent fingers roamed over her body, massaging her breasts and urging her legs apart as they stroked her most intimate parts with the scented potion. To her surprise, Bree found herself becoming aroused.

Shiraza ended the chant, holding a low note that sent a shiver through Bree’s core. Or maybe it was the soft, rhythmic pressure from the hands of the women, whose downcast eyes had yet to meet Bree’s despite their familiarity with every inch of her body.

The old woman began again, motioning Bree to spread her arms apart and join in. She took up the hymn. It was an ancient anthem, a Gregorian chant set to the primitive beat of drums. Bree felt it resonate within her, filling her mind and body until there was nothing but the song. No pain in her head, no strange people, no more bizarre

sights. Only the song... and the wicked waves of sensation pouring through her.

She was hardly aware of it when the women led her out of the bath to a dressing table along one wall of the room. A large silver disc hung on the wall behind the table and Bree watched the preparations in the reflection as though it was a movie screen.

One of the women drew her hair back and began weaving in an elaborate headdress of gold and jewels. The other rummaged through the silver pots and alabaster jars on the table, finally choosing one filled with ochre crushed to a fine powder. She mixed it with oil and painted Bree's lips a deep red. With a tiny brush she drew a thick line of kohl around Bree's eyes then coated her lashes with more kohl to make them look long and full.

Bree was shocked out of her dream-like state when the woman began drawing a stylized hibiscus flower on her breast like the ones on the statue of Bilquis. The attendant painted the petals a pale apricot, blending the color darker near its center, then covered Bree's nipples with red ocher to match her lips. Finally, the young woman picked up an ornate silver box. Opening it, she took out a tiny jeweled hummingbird. Deep-green emeralds covered the wings; rubies ringed the throat. The eyes were made of black stones that sparkled like diamonds.

The woman began teasing and pinching Bree's left nipple. Then she clipped the hummingbird's beak to the hard nub. Bree nearly shrieked at the sharp pain, but she caught Shiraza's worried eyes in the mirror and gritted her teeth.

The attendant repeated the elaborate decorations on Bree's right breast, clamping a matching hummingbird to that nipple when she finished, so the birds looked like they were feasting on the red nectar at the center of the flowers.

Her attendants drew Bree to a standing position and fastened an elaborate belt of gold and jewels around her hips, like the one the statue wore. To it they attached a filmy white garment that flowed over her hips to the floor. Split up the center, with each step she took the garment was designed to fall open, revealing a tantalizing glimpse

of her most private parts. A delicate pair of sandals completed the costume, trimmed with more of the metal Bree had begun to suspect was solid gold.

“Oh, my lady, you look so beautiful!” Shiraza beamed. “You are the image of your beloved ancestor when she appeared out of the desert to captivate the king with her charms. Come, my dearest one. Twilight is falling. The procession is about to begin.”

Shiraza led her out of the suite and through the gardens, trailed by the two naked attendants. As they walked, the old woman whispered last-minute instructions.

“Tonight’s ceremony is meant to prepare you to receive the mate King Solomon’s successor has selected for you. You will be given to the chosen one when you arrive in the Holy City. Your caravan will depart as soon as the ceremony is completed.”

Shiraza went on. “Although you will see other participants engaging in every sort of sexual activity, you need not fear that you will be violated. Everyone in the kingdom knows you must be a virgin when you are claimed by your mate. Remember – the ritual is designed to enhance your desire for your future husband. The people want to see their high priestess at the height of her arousal...eager to accept the mate destined for her by the gods, that they may smile upon our land and bless us.”

They stepped through an arched door on the far side of the walled garden. Bree gasped.

Before her sprawled the city of Mahrib, lit up like a kingdom in a fairy tale. Two and three-story buildings painted in bright shades of turquoise, pink, and purple were surrounded by whitewashed walls hiding their gardens from the view of passersby. The city was rich and prosperous with shops and markets everywhere. Tables bulging with exotic goods lined the narrow streets, their wares covered for the night by colorful woven rugs.

A path lined with torches wound through the streets. It stretched to the city gates and beyond, through lush green fields and over a bridge across a narrow ribbon of water. In the distance, Bree could see the temple, where huge bonfires illuminated the enormous stone

columns.

All along the route, crowds had gathered. Chanting, singing, swaying rhythmically. A procession had formed in the road below the palace grounds, waiting to begin the trek. Drummers had lined up first, followed by rows of soldiers Bree guessed were the royal guards Shiraza had spoken of.

After the soldiers, a double line of young girls dressed in flowing white robes carried flutes and lyres. Next were the camels, each tended by a young man. There must have been a hundred of the creatures, all bearing saddlebags bulging with cargo.

“That is part of your dowry, to be given as tribute to your future mate,” Shiraza whispered. “It is but a fraction of the riches your kingdom possesses.” She gestured to a phalanx of solemn-faced men in bright robes who waited behind the rows of camels. They carried bells and gongs and were preceded by yet another band of drummers. “Those are the temple priests, who will preside over tonight’s ceremony.”

But it was the sight at the doors of the palace that took Bree’s breath away. A dozen elephants, each adorned with a jeweled headdress, stood patiently in line, single file. Every elephant had an enormous wooden platform strapped to its back. Some were piled with silver and gold ingots; some held mounds of frankincense and jars overflowing with rare spices.

Two carved wooden columns topped the last elephant’s platform. An attendant holding a rope attached to the animal’s headdress called out a command. The beast fell to its knees. A bevy of young men appeared out of nowhere and arranged themselves into a human stairway in front of it.

Two priests came forward and held Bree’s hands as they guided her up, all three of them balancing on the backs of the young men. They led her to the center of the platform and slipped her wrists into loops of silken rope attached to the top of each column, spreading her arms up and out as they had been when she sang the sacred chant.

The priests climbed down, and the elephant majestically rose to its full height. Bree found herself grateful for the taut restraints when the

beast took its first steps. She was rocked to and fro as the elephant plodded along. She spread her arms further apart and wrapped her hands around the ropes to help maintain her balance.

Far ahead, the procession started to move. The sound of the drums echoed off the distant cliffs, filling the valley with their insistent beat. The flutes and lyres played a haunting refrain while the people lining the route swayed and chanted along with the music.

Behind her, another phalanx of royal guards shielded her mount from the mass of humanity that fell in step behind her. It seemed everyone in the kingdom was in attendance. Bree saw tiny babies, even elderly men and women unable to walk so far, carried in loving arms.

The scholar in Bree was transfixed. Before her lay the wonders of one of the wealthiest civilizations ever known. The sophistication of the city amazed her with the incredible diversity of goods available in the shops and market stalls. Beautiful stone houses that would be considered mansions by any current standard lined the route.

But what lay beyond the city gates surprised her the most. Far from being an arid desert, the land was lush and green as far as the eye could see. Crops laid out in large rectangles flourished along both sides of the river flowing through the center of the valley. It emptied into a huge lake. At the far edge of the lake stood a massive dam, taller and wider than any known to exist in ancient times.

She was so captivated by the scene spread out before her she forgot about her appearance. But when men in the crowd began pulling aside their robes to display their erect penises, shy Sabrina took the place of Bree the scholar.

It was one thing to study drawings on papyrus, to decipher ancient scrolls, uncover dusty impressions carved on rock. Seeing live men – some of them extremely well-endowed – engaging in a socially acceptable rite of an ancient fertility cult shocked her to the core. As men were wont to do throughout the ages, they shouted and boasted about their performance, openly stroking and fondling their erections as she passed by.

To her surprise, rather than scolding them the women joined in,

touching the stiff cocks, stroking their breasts and hips while making their own brazen comments. Looking closer, Bree realized most of the women were naked from the waist up. What she had thought brightly colored clothes were actually elaborate designs painted on the women's breasts, like the hibiscus flowers adorning hers.

Bree began to fall under the spell of the event – half-naked bodies dancing in the flickering light of the torches, hypnotic chanting and drumming that penetrated her very soul. She was acutely aware of the cool breeze on her hard nipples, the stares of the men as her long skirt fell open with each swaying step of the elephant. A part of her mind wondered if the paints and oils covering her body had been infused with a mind-altering herb.

As the procession drew near the temple, reason gave way. She lost herself in the moment, swaying to the music with every stride of the huge beast, letting her imagination run free as she stared at handsome men devouring her with their eyes and saluting her with their stiff cocks.

The massive columns of the temple rose ahead. Elaborate carvings decorated the top of each one – men and women engaging in every kind of sexual act, sometimes in pairs, sometimes with multiple partners. A set of bronze doors as tall as three men atop each other stood open, giving her a tantalizing glimpse of the temple's inner sanctum.

The camels had been herded to an open area beyond the temple, and the elephants were heading there as well. But the priests led her mount to the steps of the building, where the gentle giant fell to its knees.

A dozen young men wearing sarong-type garments slung around their hips waited at the doors of the temple. She caught a familiar scent. Their bodies had been anointed with the same oil Bree's attendants had massaged into her. Each was a perfect specimen of manhood, with well-defined muscles gleaming in the firelight.

To Bree's surprise, they unhooked the platform from the beast and carried the whole thing, with her still tied to the columns, up the stairs and through the enormous doors.

Inside, throngs of people had assembled. In the center, just as she had proposed in her doctoral thesis, a massive bronze bull sculpted with a gigantic erect penis stood on a raised dais. But there was no altar under the bull. Instead, the men carried her platform there, placing it under the bull's enormous member.

Shivering with a mixture of embarrassment and arousal, Bree suddenly realized she herself would be the centerpiece of the fertility rite.

The young men took up positions around her, facing the room. The priests followed them into the temple, walking solemnly in two lines, chanting and waving incense burners. The cloying odor of frankincense was so thick Bree could almost taste it. She watched the smoke take shape, transforming itself into writhing bodies. One part of her mind realized she was hallucinating, no doubt due to whatever substance had been in the paint and oils. Her body had absorbed it through every pore.

Though the shapes were a trick of her mind, the growing arousal she felt was real. *I'd be rich if I brought some of this back to modern times. It's the ultimate aphrodisiac, working on men and women alike.*

Judging from their behavior, many in the crowd had ingested some kind of intoxicating substance as well. She saw dozens of women fall to their knees and begin pleasuring the lucky men near them. Occasionally two or three males clustered around a single female instead, kissing, fondling, holding her captive while they drew moans and muffled screams from her.

The drumbeats grew louder and more frantic, building to a crescendo. Suddenly, the music stopped. The crowd hushed; the temple was silent as a tomb.

In the stillness, the first notes of the haunting melody Shiraza had taught her rang out, played by a single flute somewhere in the vast chamber. Others joined in, at first only a few, then more and more. The music swelled. The drummers began again, pounding out the primitive beat. She wasn't sure how she knew, but it was time to play her part in the ritual.

Bree started singing.

Her voice rang out, full and strong. She sang an ancient homage to pagan gods and the great bull over her head. She sang of fertile fields bursting with crops and the wide river flowing with life. She sang of virile men and alluring women, of sensuous earthly pleasures, of passion and lust. The melody rose and fell. Bree lost herself in it, letting the chant carry her beyond rational thought.

The inner chamber of the temple had been designed by one of the greatest architects of ancient times. With the bronze body of the bull above her magnifying the sound and deflecting it outward, her voice echoed off the far walls of the enormous structure.

Her song ended, but the music continued. The young men surrounding her platform disappeared into the crowd. Each one returned, accompanied by a woman carrying a golden chalice. Bree watched them approach, one part of her mind still capable of scholarly thought. The chalices, she theorized, signified that these women would participate in fertility rites with the temple's male prostitutes...perhaps ordered to by an impotent spouse, perhaps by a father worried he would die without a male heir if his less-than-beautiful daughter did not soon find a mate.

Each woman drank deeply from the chalice then offered it to her male companion. He drank as well and took her by the hand, leading her to the dais. The women stepped onto the raised platform facing Bree. As one, they knelt, spreading their knees apart, bending forward with arms outstretched so their heads touched the stone floor. Behind them, the men raised the women's skirts then pulled off their own garments.

The women were at the perfect height for each man to begin exploring the bounty set before him. They used their fingers, their tongues. A few rubbed their erect penises across their partner's exposed labia, teasing.

Bree was both shocked and aroused at the live sex show playing out in front of her. One of the young men had positioned himself right in front of her. He rammed his swollen cock into his partner then grabbed her hips and started pumping in and out, all the while staring boldly into Bree's eyes.

The drumbeats increased in tempo. Two of the priests stepped onto the platform. One held a golden chalice, larger and more ornate than the others. He raised it to her lips.

Bree took a sip. It was filled with a potent liqueur tasting of apricots and honey. She gasped as a bolt of fire ran down her throat. Heat radiated through her veins.

He offered the cup again and she drank deeply. When they moved as one to unclip the hummingbirds from her nipples, Bree cried out at the sudden pain.

Immediately, the two women who had prepared her for the ritual fell to their knees by her side. One gently massaged Bree's aching nipples while the other slipped a hand between her legs and began stroking her clit. The crowd roared its approval.

In front of her, the young acolyte slammed his cock into the pussy of the woman kneeling submissively before him. She moaned and ground herself against him with each stroke.

Bree closed her eyes, swaying to the drumbeat. Pain morphed into pleasure as the attendants expertly brought her near climax. Though aware of her surroundings, she couldn't move. All she could do was give herself over to the fever raging through her. The desperate need for release.

The drums built to a crescendo. Bree let out a wild scream, magnified by the body of the massive bull above her, as she was swept, body and soul, over the edge into oblivion.

Chapter Four

The gentle rocking woke her.

Bree lay quietly as awareness slowly returned. She opened her eyes and met with a puzzle. Thick curtains surrounded her, walling off a tiny cushioned space. She was curled up on a soft rug, dressed once again in a long flowing robe, this time in a rich aqua shade. The entire space swayed rhythmically, like a berth at sea.

Bree sat up and parted the curtains. Harsh desert sun blinded her. As her eyes adjusted to the bright light, she gasped. Ahead of her stretched an endless line of camels, plodding through a vast sea of sand. She realized the swaying motion was due to the gait of the patient beast carrying her in a compartment on its back. *No wonder ancient tribes called them the ships of the desert.*

She pulled the curtains apart to get a better view of her surroundings. The sun was fierce, but not yet at its peak in the sky, so she guessed it was late morning. The city of Mahrib and its fertile green fields were nowhere in sight. To her right, a jagged row of dull-brown mountains in the distance baked in the heat. On the left, the windswept dunes of the desert extended as far as the eye could see.

An attendant walked beside each camel, leading it by a length of rope attached to a leather harness slipped over the animal's head. Despite the crushing heat, the attendants were swathed head to toe in long robes to protect them from the searing rays of the sun. Only their eyes were visible when they turned their heads from side to side, scanning the horizon for dangers that might lie ahead.

Two other heavily robed figures sat on saddles atop a pair of camels directly ahead of her. Despite the shapeless clothing, Bree could tell they were females. She'd learned the difference – the men wore tightly wound turbans on their heads and the women, flowing veils.

Bree sank back against the cushions and let the curtains fall. The temperature inside her enclosure immediately dropped from that of an oven to merely unbearably hot. Her throat was so dry, she could

barely swallow.

Tucked into a corner of her padded enclosure, she found a clay jar filled with dates and nuts as well as several goatskin flasks. Eagerly, she grabbed a flask and brought it to her lips. After weeks of living at the dig, Bree was able to ignore the odor of unwashed animal emanating from the container. She took a long swallow. The water bore faint traces of crushed mint leaves, and it felt warm enough to brew tea, but it soothed her parched throat.

She followed it up with a handful of dates and nuts, and a delicacy made of crushed sesame seeds mixed with honey. "It's ancient trail mix!" she exclaimed aloud. "All that's missing is the chocolate." She found herself giggling uncontrollably, probably a lingering effect of the drugs her body had absorbed while being prepared for last night's ceremony.

Her camel stopped moving, and she heard a soft voice outside the curtain.

"My lady, are you well?"

The curtain opened, and Bree stared into a pair of huge dark eyes. Despite the robes covering the rest of the figure, Bree recognized her as one of the female attendants from the palace who accompanied her to the ceremony. She blushed as memories came flooding back, remembering how the woman had stroked and fondled her body while she moaned and screamed with wild abandon in front of the huge crowd.

The young woman averted her eyes and bowed her head, as though sensing Bree's discomfort. "Does my lady need a few moments to relieve herself? We will set up the screen that you may do so in privacy. Hassan can help you down from the chaise," she offered, gesturing to the man who held the camel's rope.

"Yes, thank you," Bree replied, embarrassed.

Hassan effortlessly lifted her into his arms and deposited her on the sand. Then he went to the camel trailing behind Bree's mount and unpacked a screen made of wooden poles lashed together with white cloth strung between them. Within minutes, he erected a rounded enclosure large enough for Bree to fit inside. The walls were high

enough to afford her privacy. Even under such bizarre conditions, she found that taking care of bodily functions was so basic, so normal, it helped to shake off the lingering effects of the substance she'd been given.

Many scholars, herself included, theorized that alcoholic drinks and possibly even hallucinogenic plants were used to enhance the dreamlike state participants sought to attain during their rituals. Bree had always been straightlaced and uptight. But after last night, she could say with certainty that at least one ancient civilization had discovered substances capable of drastically altering one's mood and behavior.

In her thirty-one years she'd only had one serious boyfriend – a disastrous dalliance in graduate school with one of her professors. He dumped her after she confronted him about stealing some of her research and publishing it as his own. She'd thought she was in love with him, and his betrayal and callous treatment afterward made her withdraw even more.

After James, she made certain she was too busy with research and studies to date or even go to bars with girlfriends on Friday nights. She'd never experimented with the drugs that were readily available on campus. She'd never gone on a wild spring break trip or attended a drunken frat party.

Yet last night she'd acted like a slut. She thought back to the procession where she'd been paraded through the streets half naked, and marveled at how she found herself accepting, even participating in the bizarre ceremony that followed. *I'm glad this whole thing is just a crazy dream. But it's sure gotten me hotter than I've ever been before.*

A snort from the camel dragged her thoughts back to the present. Bree stepped out of the enclosure to find Hassan had rigged up another shelter. The crude tent offered shade from the blistering sun overhead but stood open on two sides to allow the rare wisps of breeze to flow through. Inside the tent, he'd laid out rugs to cover the sand, while Bree's female companions unpacked water flasks, packets of dried fruit and something that looked and smelled like jerky.

“We will rest here during the heat of the midday sun and resume

our journey later,” one of her attendants explained. In the distance, Bree could see similar shelters being erected all along the length of the caravan. A dozen or so animals at the head of the caravan continued along a route that to her seemed invisible.

The young woman answered Bree’s question before she could ask it.

“They will move on for several hours before stopping to rest. By the time we catch up with them tonight, they will have our camp set up and preparations for the evening meal underway.”

“Have you traveled with a caravan before?” Bree asked.

“My sister Yesha and I made the journey from the kingdom of King Menelek with our father Raheem. He was a gift from the king to his twin sister Rahina, your mother. Although we were very young, the memory of that journey will be etched in my mind forever.”

Yesha spoke up. “Has my lady forgotten the story of how we came to be in your service?”

Remembering Shiraza’s warning to tell no one of her strange situation, Bree made up an excuse. “I am still feeling the effects of the drink I had last night. It left my head in a fog, and I cannot think clearly.”

The woman nodded. “That is a common reaction. It is indeed a powerful potion. Please, my lady, lie down and rest. I will mix you a potion to take away any lingering effects of the sacred drink. While I do, if it pleases my lady, Alina can tell you the story once again.”

Bree nodded gratefully. Anything she found out might keep her from making a serious mistake when dealing with these strangers who seemed to know her so well. Already she’d learned their names.

While her sister mixed dried herbs with liquid from yet another flask, Alina began her story with the same prologue Shiraza recited to start her tale.

“Praise and glory be to the gods. There was once a good and wise king named Menelek, ruler of a vast realm far away from here, given to him by his father, the most exalted King Solomon himself. Menelek had a twin sister he loved dearly, the beautiful Rahina. She, too, was destined to be the ruler of a great land, the rich and powerful

kingdom of Sabatea. When their mother Shaitar left this world on her journey to the gods, Rahina was crowned the new Queen of Sheba. Her brother King Menelek sent her his most prized possession in tribute – his faithful servant and bodyguard Raheem. In his goodness and mercy, the king allowed Raheem to take his wife Azeen and their two little daughters, Alina and Yesha.”

Yesha chimed in. “Praise and glory be to the gods. Our father’s pleasure in life has been to serve the children of the great Queen Shaitar. We in turn have been granted the honor of spending our lives serving you, my lady – the Queen of Sheba, beloved child of Shaitar’s child.” Alina and Yesha fell to their knees and bowed in Bree’s direction, their foreheads touching the thick carpet covering the desert sands.

So these women, and their father before them, are slaves, given away at the whim of the master they serve. Bree was appalled at the very idea of owning slaves.

“Please, rise and join me in this meal,” she urged.

The women exchanged nervous glances but did not move from their subservient position.

Bree sighed. “Very well, then. I *order* you to rise and sit with me. Let us share this meal as sisters. Our journey will be long, and it would amuse me to spend the hours chatting as friends.”

Reluctantly, Yesha sat up, leaning back on her heels. Alina followed. Bree reached for a handful of dried fruit, gesturing for the women to help themselves. “Remind me – do you live in the palace?”

She drew out the women, asking questions about their daily lives and soaking up the replies. She’d been presented with the opportunity to find out details of ancient life no amount of digging in the sand could ever reveal.

“No, my lady, we are not permitted to have suitors.” Alina giggled in response to one query. “Although there is a handsome royal guardsman whose gaze lingers on Yesha every time he is in her presence.”

Yesha shot her sister a reproachful glance. “We serve at the pleasure of the high priestess, our queen. If it be her desire, *your*

desire, to watch one or both of us celebrate the sacred rite with a male of your choosing, we will be honored to do your bidding. Until then, we remain untouched.”

“You said ‘one or both of you.’ Do Sabatean men have more than one wife at a time?”

“Those who are wealthy often have several wives, and some women have several husbands. There is a rhyme we learned as children when we came here.” She began clapping her hands and recited in a singsong voice. “One to cook my dinner, one to guard my gate, one to pray at the temple, and a pleasing one to mate.”

Alina nodded. “A man takes a single wife when he is young and handsome...and poor. If he becomes rich in his later years, he may hunger for a nubile young body to satisfy him when engaging in the sacred rite. In her position as first wife, the woman, now growing old as well, often purchases a young acolyte from the temple, bringing him or her into their home as a gift to her husband. In some households, the young man or woman pleasures both husband and wife, singly or together. These temple acolytes have high status in the household, sometimes inheriting all the wealth and taking an attendant of their own from the temple.”

Prostitution in the name of religion, socially accepted ménage-a-trois. The customs of the Sabateans sounded like they’d been torn from the headlines of a scandal sheet. Bree’s head was spinning. The only difference from their modern-day counterparts seemed to be that these ancient people were more accepting of such behavior.

After their meal and a nap in the sweltering heat, Hassan packed up the temporary shelter, and Bree and her companions mounted their camels. Late afternoon turned into twilight, and still they plodded on. Bree pulled the curtains aside to gaze at the nighttime sky and the stars twinkling overhead. She knew their guides at the head of the caravan would study the map of the sky to plot their route for the next day’s journey.

The evening was similar to the ones Bree had spent on the dig. It was nearly dark when they finally stopped. A hot meal awaited them and larger tents had already been pitched near a welcoming fire. That

night she fell asleep, to the haunting melody of a flute, played by a lone guardsman as he stood watch outside her tent.

Bree soon fell into the rhythm of life in a caravan. Days and nights flowed seamlessly together, each broken by a few hours of sleep. The landscape never varied – hot, dry, brown. Every few days, they stopped at one of the wells the guides had mapped on previous journeys. Camels could go as long as five days without water, but even they would die of thirst if the caravan did not find the next well.

One day they made camp early, stopping at an oasis where an underground river rose through the sand to the surface, creating a large pond. After days of staring at shades of brown, the bright blue water dazzled her eyes. Hassan put several privacy screens together to make a large enclosure in the shallows. Bree and her attendants welcomed the luxury of bathing and washing their hair, laughing and splashing each other like children.

A narrow circle of green surrounded the oasis, with robust date palms and wild grasses growing along the water's edge. Beyond lay sparse vegetation – waist-high bushes studded with thorns to protect the grayish-green leaves they bore. Occasionally they caught a glimpse of an animal disappearing into its burrow. Hassan pointed out footprints of larger creatures in the damp sand around the pond.

Suddenly a cry rang out. One of the guides had spotted a small herd of zebra galloping toward the distant mountains. A guardsman leaped onto his camel and raced after them, bringing one down with an arrow. That night, the feasting went on for hours, with everyone eating and drinking their fill.

Once they got underway the next morning, the combination of oppressive heat and the lingering effects of a flask of wine she'd shared with Alina and Yesha over dinner lulled Bree into a state that was half-awake, half-asleep.

Screams and shouts jolted her into awareness. Tearing open the curtain, she was confronted with the sight of a lioness snarling and roaring as it tried to bring down one of the camels. Its hapless attendant let out a bloodcurdling shriek as another lion dragged him away by one foot.

More lions surrounded the caravan. Camels frantically kicked and bucked, straining to get away. A few of their handlers panicked, giving up their attempts to control the beasts and running away to hide in the brush.

One of the royal guards galloped toward them, drawing his bow. Before he could get off a shot, another camel slammed into him as it fled, knocking him to the ground. A lion was on him in an instant.

“Balik!” Hassan screamed, dropping the reins of Bree’s mount and running to his aid.

As they sat by the fire one evening, Bree had drawn out Hassan, asking him about his life, Hassan pointed out his younger brother Balik. He told her how eager Balik had been to set out on such an adventure and how, before they left Mahrib, he had sworn on the soul of their dead mother that he would watch over her youngest son on the long journey.

Hassan raced toward the beast, drawing a knife from the sheath at his waist. Sensing danger, the lion turned and sprang at him. He drove his knife into the creature’s chest just as it sank its teeth into his neck. Bree watched in horror as he collapsed on the ground.

The wounded lion picked up Hassan’s limp body in its massive jaws, shaking it like a dog. Then, enraged by pain, the beast leaped forward...straight at Bree’s camel. With no one holding the reins, her mount bolted. All she could do was hang on for dear life to the leather straps securing her chaise to the camel’s back.

The terrified creature took off into the desert. Within a few hundred yards, the lion abandoned the chase, heading back to the easier prey all clustered together. But her panic-stricken mount kept going, galloping into the barren wasteland.

Bree knew her only chance for survival was to somehow turn the camel back to the caravan. By now, other guards would have brought down the lions. She’d seen their skill at hunting many times during the journey.

Leaning forward, she grabbed a handful of the camel’s wiry coat. The rope Hassan had led it with hung from the animal’s halter, dangling nearly to the ground. If she could inch her way far enough

up the camel's neck to grab it, she might be able to turn the beast, or at least rein it in. Meanwhile, the animal covered what seemed like miles, moving faster than Bree had ever seen.

Gripping the tufts of coarse hair, Bree painstakingly pulled herself forward. But she still couldn't reach the rope. The animal swerved, and she screamed, nearly losing her balance. Her fingers scrabbled for a hold, closing around the leather harness strap. Desperate, she yanked on it.

The camel shied. Bree found herself flying through the air.

Lying in the sand, with the breath knocked out of her body, Bree watched her mount disappear over the horizon.

"Cursed be thou by all the gods!" she yelled then shook her head ruefully. "Listen to me," she muttered. "I've been in this strange dream so long that even when I'm talking to myself, I sound like somebody from their long-dead culture."

Bree struggled to her feet. Turning in a circle, she took stock of her situation.

Sand. Everywhere.

Endless hills of scorching-hot sand, rising and falling like waves on the ocean. And overhead, the cruel midday sun. She whispered a prayer of thanks that she'd had the presence of mind to dress in full desert garb. It had been unbearably hot inside the curtained enclosure, but the long robe and veiled headdress would give her skin some protection. Bree vowed she wouldn't panic and began walking, following the camel's tracks. It carried water and shelter. Without them, she wouldn't survive.

"Sooner or later, that damned camel will slow down. It's been running for miles. Surely the creature can't go on at that pace much longer."

Before long, the searing heat began taking its toll, sucking the moisture from her body as it sucked the life from her soul. Bree staggered up and down the endless dunes for what seemed like days, though she was still rational enough to know it had only been hours.

She trudged along, talking to herself out loud. Sometimes coach, sometimes cheerleader, she urged her burning feet to take a step, then

another. She prayed to every Sabatean god she could remember to lead her to a rock, so she could curl into a ball and rest in its shadow. She cursed the camel and its ancestors with ever-more colorful phrases. Finally, she gave way to exhaustion and thirst and dropped to her knees, telling herself she'd only rest for a moment.

Bree was about to close her eyes when the blurred figure appeared, coming from the direction the camel had run. She'd heard of mirages, but this was her first experience with one of the legendary desert apparitions.

She knew they looked so real, so believable, that people sometimes went mad when they discovered the images were a trick of the mind. Bree watched, detached, as the figure raced across the sand toward her. As the image came closer, she made out a white-robed figure sitting astride a black stallion. Sounds penetrated the fog in her mind. Shouts urging the horse to gallop faster, snorting from the animal as it drew near.

The horse came to a stop. *This mirage has excellent detail. I can actually see sweat running down the animal's flanks.*

The robed figure slid off the horse and strode toward her. Bree giggled and waved, wondering when the image would disappear.

Her hand bumped into hard muscle under the soft robe. Bree gasped as her eyes traveled up...and up. If the rider was real, he stood head and shoulders over every male she'd seen other than Raheem.

White robes covered every inch of him, except for the startling blue eyes peering out from under his headdress. The figure knelt in front of Bree, and large hands began running up and down her body.

She protested, trying to swat the insolent hands away, and was rewarded with a firm smack on her bottom.

"Lie still. I will not harm you," the man said. He sounded annoyed. "I must see if you are injured."

Reaching into a fold of his robes, he drew out a goatskin flask. He pulled her to a sitting position and held the flask to her lips, cradling her head in the crook of his arm.

Water dribbled down her chin. Real water. Bree finally realized this was no mirage. She gulped it greedily. He allowed her to continue

for a moment before taking back the flask. She groaned and tried to grab it, but he pushed her hand away.

“No more for now. Let your body become accustomed to what you have had, else your belly will cramp, and it will all come up again.”

He slipped his other hand under her knees and rose, with Bree in his arms. Depositing her on the horse's back, he vaulted up behind her. Bree swayed and would have toppled off. The man responded instantly, wrapping one arm around her waist.

With a tug on the reins, he turned the horse's head then gave the stallion's flanks a light kick. Bree was thrown against her rescuer's broad chest as they galloped away.

Chapter Five

They kept up the pace for what seemed like hours. The man behind her was as strong as his stallion.

Bree was acutely aware of the hard muscles in his chest, the tension and flex in his powerful arms as he guided the animal. She inhaled his masculine scent and felt his breath, hot against the back of her neck. As they rode, the wind in her face and the sips of water she'd had worked their magic, and she revived enough to begin speculating about who her rescuer was and where they were headed.

In the distance, she caught sight of something moving. Another lion? A jolt of fear tore through her.

Gradually, the image came into focus. It was her camel, plodding along, exhausted by its desperate escape. The chaise she'd ridden in was gone. Only a torn scrap of fabric from the curtains remained, caught under one of the straps that had held it on. Fortunately her leather saddlebags still hung on the animal's sides.

The man reined in his stallion. Slipping off its back, he slowly approached the camel, crooning to it in a low voice. The beast stopped and fell to its knees. The man drew closer, petting the camel's head while he took hold of the rope dangling from its harness. He vaulted back onto his horse and circled Bree's body with his left arm, pulling her tight against his chest. Then he transferred the horse's reins to his left hand, leaving his right hand free to hold the camel's rope. A nudge to the stallion's flanks set it in motion again, this time at a more sedate pace. He tugged on the rope. The camel rose obediently and trailed along behind them.

Another dull-brown ridge of mountains rose up, silhouetted against the setting sun. The horse took a barely discernable path uphill and through a narrow pass.

When they came out the other side, Bree gasped. Below her, ringed by jagged mountains, lay a huge body of water. Palm trees flourished along the banks. Bright fields of green surrounded the oasis, with the color tapering off to more muted shades of gray-green in the

foothills.

The oasis supported what amounted to a small town with clusters of tents dotted here and there. She saw figures clad in white robes going about their daily chores. Herds of goats grazed in the foothills, tended by smaller robed figures.

One tent, larger than all the others, stood alone. A dozen Arabian stallions were corralled nearby. The horse picked up its pace, heading for the enclosure.

A bevy of veiled women ran out of the tent, their excited voices blurring together. Bree could make out a word here and there, but the dialect was unfamiliar.

The man barked a command, and the women fell silent, bowing their heads. He slid to the ground and reached up. With both hands clasped around her waist, he lifted Bree from the horse's back and set her on her feet.

The women crowded around her, touching her bright coral earrings, pointing at her jeweled sandals and the delicate workmanship of the gold necklace she wore. Her companion strode off toward the tent without a word, leaving Bree and her string of admirers to trail along behind him.

Bree stepped inside – and was transported to an *Arabian Nights* movie from the mind of Cecil B. DeMille. Colorful rugs layered one over another covered the entire floor. In the center of the tent, an ornate metal brazier glowed, with a pot of fragrant mint tea brewing on the coals.

Her rescuer threw himself down onto a padded chaise near the brazier. One of the women hurried to him, carrying a bowl of water. He unwound the turban covering his head and dipped his hands in the water, splashing it on his face.

Bree took stock of her rescuer. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with piercing blue eyes set in a rugged face bronzed by the sun. His sharply chiseled features had been stripped of excess flesh by the harsh desert life. Although his hair fell in shoulder-length dark locks, the man had only a faint stubble on his face. Most of the men she'd seen in Mahrib wore full beards. She knew his lack of facial hair was a

sign of wealth and good fortune, showing he had water enough to spare and servants to shave him regularly.

One of the veiled women dropped to her knees in front of him, offering a cup of tea. He took it, smiling fondly at her, and caressed her cheek. Then he gestured for Bree to come forward.

She bowed her head and recited the formal greeting she had learned in case they encountered a nomadic tribe along the caravan route. "Lord of the desert, may the gods smile upon you. I thank you for rescuing me from the sands. My people will burn incense to all the holy ones on your behalf."

He nodded once and replied in a formal tone as well. "I serve the will of the gods."

Although his accent was strange, the words were close enough to those of the Sabatean language for her to understand most of what he said. He motioned for her to sit, but he had the only chair in the room, so Bree curled up on a rug near his chaise.

One of the women brought her a bowl of water, too. Bree took it gratefully, pulling her veil aside just enough to bring her cupped hands to her face and rinse it. She knew better than to remove her veil in front of a strange man. In the ancient world, that would brand her as a whore.

A woman with warm dark eyes rimmed with kohl bowed, handed her a cup of tea then retreated to a far corner with the others. The man waited till Bree had sipped from the cup then spoke again.

"Who are you. and how do you come to be alone in the desert?"

"I am Bilquis, known in my land as the Queen of Sheba. I was traveling with my caravan to the Holy City of Solomon, there to be united with the mate chosen for me from my father's people." Bree made a point of establishing her status both as a queen and as a woman betrothed to another. She had no intention of being consigned to the gaggle of female servants that made up the man's harem.

His eyebrows rose, but he did not speak.

"Our caravan was set upon by a pack of lions," she went on. "One of the creatures attacked my attendant Hassan, killing him. My camel panicked, fleeing into the desert. When I tried to stop the wretched

beast, it threw me and bolted away, leaving me to follow on foot.” She fell silent, watching his face as he weighed his response.

“You are indeed favored by the gods, Queen of Sheba,” he said, his voice low and deep. “First they spared your life in the attack then they blessed you and allowed you to survive in the desert. And finally, they delivered you here to bask in my mercy, rather than sending you north to be found by our bloodthirsty neighbors. I am known as Tahraz, the suiltan of this al ain.”

She didn’t have to be a linguist to figure out he was claiming to be ruler of this isolated realm. “May the gods rain blessings down upon you, Suiltan Tahraz,” she replied.

He regarded her solemnly then apparently came to a decision. “I will send a messenger to your people, telling them of your good fortune. If they respond in a way that pleases me, I will enter into discussions with your suiltan for the terms of your release.”

“Release? Am I a captive?”

Tahraz’s response shocked her. “What did you expect? I am the suiltan. All who dwell in this al ain are under my protection...and my rule.” He gestured to the women huddled in the corner. “They submit willingly to me and do my bidding in all things. You will do so as well for as long as you are here, until the day comes when I choose to return you to your ruler.”

“I *am* the ruler!” Bree shot to her feet, ignoring the suiltan’s angry glare. “Did you not listen? I am Queen of Sheba, from the city of Mahrib in the great land of Sabatea. If you wish to negotiate my release, you do so with me. My kingdom will pay any price I authorize for my safe return.”

He smiled sadly, shaking his head. “I cannot negotiate with you. You are powerless, a mere female, to be used for labor – or enjoyment – at my command.” His face hardened. “You will not speak to me with such disrespect again. I excuse your behavior this one time only. But you will no doubt be here for years. I suggest you learn our ways quickly and save yourself from punishment.”

Bree decided her only choice was to continue acting the way he would expect from someone claiming to be a figure of authority.

“Powerless?” she replied haughtily. “You cannot speak to me this way! I am queen of the richest and mightiest kingdom on all the caravan routes. My royal guards will hasten here to rescue me...and you will find yourself begging *me* for mercy.”

Tahraz smiled wickedly. “Not if they do not know where you are,” he pointed out. “My people have survived here in this al ain for centuries without being discovered. Our land lies far from the caravan routes, hidden by the mountains and forgotten over the centuries. From time to time we travel to other lands, but only in disguise. Day and night, my men guard the pass that leads here. No one comes to my al ain unless he or she is invited by me...” He waved a hand in her direction. “Or delivered by the gods.”

He went on. “You will be treated fairly, as long as you follow my commands. As a female, your obedience to the male who owns you is required by our law. Duties will be assigned to you, which you will complete promptly and willingly. Orders will be given. You will obey them without question, or you will be punished. Each member of this tribe must do as I command, that we all may live in peace under my protection. It is the way of our people.”

Bree was frightened, but she refused to show the arrogant tribesman any weakness. “Don’t you dare threaten me,” she snapped. “I am not your slave or your captive! I will be treated as an honored guest, as befits my status. I, too, am a sovereign, worthy of the same respect you demand.”

* * *

Tahraz tamped down a flash of anger. The female, an exotic beauty with light skin and golden-brown eyes, was spirited as an untamed filly and just as headstrong. He knew her robes concealed a lush, full body. He had run his palms over her soft curves when he found her lying in the sand and checked to see if she was injured. Or worse.

He admired her bravery. In the face of certain death, she had trudged through the endless sea of sand, refusing to give way to thirst and exhaustion, until she collapsed. But he could not allow a mere female to undermine his authority by raising her voice in anger in

front of the other women. She must be put in her place, swiftly and firmly.

He clapped his hands. Two women rushed forward, bowing. "Prepare her," he commanded.

They shoved the captive to her knees. Then, grabbing her wrists, they pulled her upper body down until her head was nearly touching the carpet, arms outstretched. The female struggled to break free, but it was clear she'd been weakened by hours in the desert heat.

Tahraz rose and stood behind her. One of his slaves lifted the female's gown, tucking it into the jeweled belt around her waist and exposing her most private parts to everyone in the room. She shrieked a protest, wriggling frantically.

Tahraz chuckled as he admired the twin mounds of her shapely ass and the tantalizing glimpse of dark curls between her legs. "Is this how the queen of your land behaves in public?" he mocked. "Swaying her hips from side to side, shamelessly displaying her royal charms to any and all? How fortunate your potential suitors must be, for they may examine the source of their pleasure at leisure before deciding whether to declare their interest."

* * *

The insolent rebuke was as embarrassing as the vulnerable position in which she found herself. The brute was right – her struggles only exposed more of her to his gaze. Bree gave up her frantic attempt to escape and closed her eyes, fighting back tears of rage and helplessness.

She heard a whistling sound, then...*crack!*

Bree cried out, shocked. Before she could draw a breath to protest, another harsh whack on her bare bottom set her struggling anew. Her eyes flew open in time to see him draw back his arm and swing his leather riding crop. She gasped as a lick of fire seared the tender skin of her bottom.

Bree had never been spanked before. She shuddered as the impact settled in, sharp heat giving way to stunning pain.

He waited a moment then struck her a third time. Bree bit her lip, stifling a shriek. She would not give this barbarian the satisfaction of

crying out again.

Tahraz began spanking her in earnest, swinging the crop and landing each harsh smack in a fresh spot until the fire he ignited on her rear cheeks blazed hotter than the rays of the desert sun. She was almost grateful to the women holding her down. If not for them, she would probably have jumped up and tried to bolt away, no doubt earning even more severe punishment.

* * *

After seeing her shocked reaction to his first strokes, Tahraz was careful not to use too much force. There wasn't a mark on the creamy white skin of her lower curves, telling him his captive had never been disciplined in such a manner. But she was stubborn, refusing to cry or beg for mercy so he could stop and still save face.

Bringing this female in line would require more battles of will than it had taken to tame Ashana, his favorite mare. He would need to use all his considerable skills to make her subservient to him without destroying the fiery spirit that made her so appealing.

Tahraz delivered a few more swats then tossed the crop aside. It was enough for now. This contest would be a challenge, but he vowed that before many moons had passed, the Queen of Sheba would kneel before him willingly, to be punished – or pleased – at his whim.

He sat down and resumed their conversation, as though the interlude had never happened.

“Dasheena will take you to the women's quarters where you may bathe and dress. You will join me for the evening meal.”

* * *

It took a few moments for Bree to realize her ordeal was over.

She knelt, trembling from a mixture of anger and pain, as one of the women gently pulled her robe back down. It was the one whose face Taraz had stroked so gently. Bree looked up into a pair of kind brown eyes framed by veils like those worn by the other women.

Wordlessly, she led Bree outside across a lush green field to another tent, smaller in size. Inside, the other women waited. They had taken off the robes and veils that concealed them and were

laughing and giggling together like teenagers.

“Do not fear the suiltan,” the woman called Dasheena said. She spoke slowly, carefully pronouncing each word as Tahraz had done. “He is a good and just ruler, a most holy and merciful man. He requires only that we obey his commands without question or complaint. I, too, was punished when I first came to his hareem. But I soon learned to please him.” She smiled. “You will as well.”

One of the other women stepped forward. She had dark skin and long hair plaited into intricate braids strung with multicolored beads. “Dasheena speaks the truth,” she said. “We are blessed to belong to such a kind suiltan. My name is Na’ Ima. I come from a tribe that roams the desert, traveling from one al ain to another. I was given to Tahraz by my father in thanks after he appeared one day out of the barren sands, bringing food and water to my people. One of the wells we relied on in our travels had gone dry, and we were near death. I serve the suiltan in gratitude for giving life back to my tribe.”

Without their restrictive veils and robes Bree could see the distinctive features of the other women. There were eight in all. Two had the same dark hair and deep blue eyes of the suiltan, while the others looked to be from different ethnic groups. She was amazed to find such diversity in this isolated location. Apparently the oasis was not as isolated from the rest of the world as Tahraz led her to believe.

“You must tell us about your land, Queen Bilquis,” Na’ Ima urged. “Tell us of your customs, of your tribe that makes such fine necklaces and beautiful robes.”

“Not now, Na’ Ima,” Dasheena said. “Bilquis must prepare herself. We will have many hours to hear her tales.”

A young boy called out from the entryway, careful not to look upon the women inside the tent. He carried the saddlebags from Bree’s camel. Dasheena thanked him, opening the tent flap just enough to drag the bulging bags inside. Bree knelt and began rummaging through the contents. She knew how important it was to make friends with the women. Their support would make life bearable in this strange land.

Pulling out a pair of ruby earrings set in gold filigree, she bowed

her head and handed them to Dasheena. "Thank you for your kindness to this stranger," she said formally.

She turned to the other woman who had spoken. "Na' Ima, you have such beautiful hair. Please accept this jeweled comb as a token of my friendship," she went on, holding it out.

Dasheena handed back the earrings. "We cannot accept these gifts. We are the property of the suiltaan. Only he may bestow favors upon us. If you choose, Bilquis, you can give these gifts to Tahraz and he will do with them whatever pleases him. But we thank you for your kindness," she finished.

Bree sighed. Apparently she had a lot to learn about the customs of this tribe. She sat back on her haunches, wincing when her heels came in contact with her aching bottom. *I hope learning the rest of my lessons here will be less painful.*

All around her, the women were preparing for their evening with Tahraz, rimming their eyes with kohl, rubbing henna on their lips. Each one fastened a low-slung belt decorated with bright coins and colorful beads around her hips, over nearly transparent ankle-length skirts that did more to advertise their charms than to conceal them. The beads and coins tinkled with every step they took. Some fastened ornate halters over their breasts. Others went bare-breasted under the dark robes they donned before stepping out of the tent.

She pulled off her dusty, stained robe and veil, choosing another from the bags Shiraza had packed for her weeks ago. Gathering up the handful of jewelry she'd selected for the women, along with pots of frankincense and a flask of the rare scented oil used to prepare her for the temple ceremony, she tucked the gifts back into her saddlebag. Then she followed Dasheena across the clearing.

Inside the tent, three young men sat cross-legged off to one side of Tahraz. Two played flutes and the third a strange stringed instrument. Tahraz beckoned Na' Ima to come forward, and she began singing. The words and the melody were unfamiliar. Bree thought it must be a traditional chant from Na' Ima's nomadic tribe.

A stooped old man entered the tent bearing a huge clay platter covered with a dome. He bowed before Tahraz then lifted the cover.

The odor of succulent roasted meat and fragrant herbs made Bree's mouth water. Was it only last night she'd feasted on wild zebra with the caravan? She felt like she hadn't eaten in weeks.

Two women piled clay plates with tempting morsels, carrying them to Tahraz. He ate in the traditional way of desert tribes, using only the fingers of one hand, dipping in turn from the plate of one attendant and then the other. Only after he waved them away, signifying he'd had his fill, did the women of the hareem fill their own plates with food. They sank to their knees around his bench, settled back on their heels, and moved their veils aside to slip morsels of food into their mouths. Bree followed, mimicking their actions.

The meal was delicious – young goat slow-roasted for hours under the clay dome to keep it moist and tender, served with sweet dates and some sort of baked tuber, accompanied by stacks of flat coarse bread. Flasks appeared as if from nowhere, and Bree had her first sip of the potent fruit-and-honey liqueur that accompanied every evening meal in the suiltan's tent.

The old cook bowed and backed out of the tent, followed by the three young musicians. The boys took up a position just outside the outer flaps, where they began playing again, this time a sensuous melody.

Once they were alone, Tahraz stood up and took off his white robe, revealing a well-muscle chest covered with dark hair that trailed off into a thin line and disappeared down the front of his loose white trousers. He smiled, stretching out a hand to Na' Ima. She rose, bowed her head, and slipped off her voluminous robe, revealing dark skin that gleamed in the light from oil lamps scattered around the room.

Swaying from side to side, she began to dance. Coins and beads tinkled with every swish of her well-padded hips. Bree had seen belly dancers in her Middle Eastern travels. But Na' Ima's dance was more primitive and far more sexual than performances meant for tourists.

Na' Ima danced closer, rubbing her bare breasts against the suiltan as she gyrated. She bent forward and tossed her head from side to side, whipping her braids against his chest, then moved lower,

teasing and arousing him. Bree could see Tahraz's prominent erection under the thin fabric of his trousers.

He sat, drawing Na' Ima down next to him. Idly stroking her bare breasts, he gestured for another woman to come forward. She was one of the blue-eyed women Bree assumed had come from within his tribe. She met Tahraz's gaze boldly as she slid the robe off her shoulders and began dancing. Soon, two other women joined her, swaying their hips to the music, coins jingling.

Dasheena tried to draw Bree into the dance. She shook her head. "I do not know how to dance as they do," she whispered. Dasheena looked worried and tried again to pull Bree to her feet, but she remained seated.

Tahraz saw her refusal and stood up abruptly. He pushed Na' Ima aside and took two steps forward. Bree found herself staring at his rigid member, outlined by the thin fabric.

He grabbed her arm and dragged her toward him then dropped back onto the chaise, pulling her facedown over his lap. "You will perform for me," he declared. "But first you will be punished for disobeying. Dasheena is in charge of my hareem. You will do whatever she requires of you without question, as though it is I who gives the command."

He pulled Bree's robe up roughly, baring her ass. Holding her down with one hand on her lower back, he peppered her sore bottom with the other.

The punishment was far different from the one he delivered with the riding crop. His hands were big and hard. Each stinging smack covered an entire bottom cheek, and he alternated, spanking first one then the other. Despite her earlier resolve, Bree found herself kicking and bucking, squirming in a vain effort to evade the harsh strokes raining down.

Tahraz made a sound deep in his throat. She suddenly became aware of his stiff rod. Every time she squirmed, she rubbed against it. Her struggles were stimulating him as much as Na' Ima's erotic dance did.

He stopped abruptly. His fingers slid between her legs, probing.

Her body responded instinctively, pussy clenching. Shocked and embarrassed, Bree reached back, trying to push his hand away. He grabbed both her wrists in his other hand and pinned them behind her back.

“If you move, I will tie you down and start again,” he warned.

Tahraz began spanking her slowly, grinding his hot hard cock against her mound with every smack.

Bree’s throat tightened with the effort to hold back her tears. She had never been treated so harshly. Her bottom was stinging and burning, but at the same time powerful sensations were building deep in her core. To compound her humiliation, it was clear Tahraz could tell she was getting aroused. He settled into a wicked rhythm, spanking her then stopping to dip a finger in her pussy and spread the slick juices he found there from her throbbing clit to the pucker of her ass.

After one last lingering exploration with his fingers, Tahraz pushed her off his lap. “You will learn our ways,” he declared. “And tomorrow *you will* entertain me.”

Bree kept her eyes downcast as Tahraz turned back to Na’ Ima. He pulled the woman close, kissing her deeply. Dasheena motioned to her, and Bree joined the other women silently backing out of the tent.

The last thing she saw was the suiltan clenching his fists around Na’ Ima’s intricate braids as she buried her head in his lap.

Chapter Six

As the first rays of the sun peeked over the mountains, Bree lay motionless in a corner of the harem's tent, listening to the soft breathing of the women curled up on rugs all around her.

She'd barely slept a wink, despite her exhaustion, replaying the night's events over and over in her mind. The women had donned their robes and veils before leaving the suiltan's tent, bowing to him unnoticed and then backing out as the cook and musicians had done.

Back at the women's quarters, Dasheena had pulled Bree aside. "You must entertain the suiltan tomorrow. It is our custom. He will take it as a great insult if you refuse again. I can teach you to dance," she went on hastily, when Bree emphatically shook her head.

"I am a queen," Bree declared. "I do not perform like a trained baboon at the will or whim of any man."

"You must please him in some way," Dasheena replied, a note of urgency creeping into her voice. "Do you sing? Can you play a flute or a lyre?"

"I will not be put on display for his amusement," Bree retorted.

"Our suiltan is a good and kind man. But he is a man. If you do not obey his command, he will lose face. We must find a way for you to entertain him...or he will punish you and then punish me as well, for my failure to teach you our ways."

Bree was speechless. She'd been so fixed on her own pride she'd never considered how her refusal might affect Dasheena.

She took the woman's hand. "I promise I will not put you in harm's way. Give me some time to think about this. I'm sure there is something I can do to entertain Tahraz while interacting with him as an equal."

Dasheena looked worried, but she nodded her head. "Sleep well, Queen Bilquis. Morning will be here all too soon."

After playing the conversation over and over in her mind most of the night, Bree was no closer to a solution. Giving up on the idea of sleep, she crept out of the tent to a small patch of shrubs nearby. The

night before, she'd been shown the secluded area where women of the harem took care of their bodily functions. Afterward, she strolled the shores of the lake, watching a flock of ibises suddenly take flight.

She heard a commotion and whirled around. The old cook she'd seen last night was hurrying toward her, babbling in a dialect she couldn't understand. But it was clear he was upset and wanted her to follow him. Bree nodded and headed toward him.

A huge splash stopped her in her tracks. She whirled around in time to see an enormous crocodile, jaws open wide, lunge out of the depths to snatch a lone egret standing in the reeds.

Bree stifled a scream. She'd had no idea such a dangerous creature lurked in the shallow waters. Bowing to the old man, she tried to express her thanks. He nodded and, sporting a toothless grin, beckoned her to follow him.

They headed to a small tent with a dome-shaped oven outside it. The cook slid a wooden board into the oven and pulled out a clay dish holding a row of the flat loaves she'd seen at last night's dinner. He reached for one of the hot slabs, motioning for Bree to help herself. Then he sat on the ground, legs crossed. After drizzling the warm bread with honey dipped from a clay pot next to the oven, he reached into a bag at his feet and came up with a handful of chopped dates and nuts. The old man sprinkled the mix onto the bread, folded it, and took a huge bite.

Bree smiled her thanks and followed suit. The bread was made from a coarse grain she didn't recognize. But, topped with honey and fruit, it was delicious, like a sweet breakfast pastry. They ate in companionable silence.

The early morning air felt cool. She let her mind drift as she surveyed the area. Besides his personal quarters, Tahraz's compound included half a dozen smaller tents, the horse corral, and pens for goats and sheep. A handful of sleepy-eyed young boys emerged from one of the tents. They headed straight for the old man's oven and grabbed slabs of the warm bread. They folded the bread and filled the pocket with fruit and nuts before stuffing the treat into their mouths.

The old man barked a command. The boys stopped in their tracks,

halfheartedly bowing in Bree's direction and muttering something she assumed was a greeting. She nodded her head solemnly. To Bree's astonishment, the old man winked at her then waved them away. The boys ran off toward the pens, driving the animals to the nearby hillside to graze.

Pulling another bag from the pockets of his robe, the cook opened it to reveal a small wooden board covered with painted squares and a handful of carved pieces of bone. He sat the board on a flat rock that served as his makeshift table and arranged several pieces on the board, piling the rest off to one side. He smiled and gestured for Bree to make the first move.

She shook her head and held out both hands, palms up. Apparently the gesture for "I have no idea" was universal, because the old man nodded and carefully moved a piece on her side. Then, offering a few phrases here and there, he played both sides of the game, showing her the simple moves and counter-moves. Bree caught on quickly, and time flew by as they played several games.

Meanwhile, members of the suiltan's family came and went, helping themselves to food, stopping to watch the progress of the game, and occasionally offering advice or suggestions. Dasheena appeared, bowed her head to the elderly cook and then curled up at his feet while she silently observed.

"The suiltan loves this game," she remarked. "Did you play it often in your tribe?"

The old man pounced, crossing the board and seizing one of her pieces. With a triumphant grin, he swept Bree's remaining pieces off the board into a pile in front of him. She grinned back, lifting both hands in defeat.

"I've never seen it before," she told Dasheena. "But I have played similar games. This appears to be a contest of strategy rather than luck. It requires the ability to size up your opponent...his willingness to take a risk, his personality."

She had a flash of inspiration. "Dasheena, does the suiltan enjoy other games as well?"

"Very much," she replied. "He plays games with the elders of the

tribe and spends time teaching the young boys to play. Games are prized for the lessons they offer. Tahraz believes games teach them there are many ways to deal with situations a man may face.”

“Does the sultaan play a game on a board that looks like this?” Bree drew a rough chessboard in the sand, briefly explaining the different pieces and the moves they were allowed.

Dasheena shook her head. “I have never seen such a game. But it appears to be one that requires skill and boldness. Those are qualities Tahraz prizes.”

“I think I have found a way to entertain the sultaan,” Bree said. “If you’ll help me.”

She asked Dasheena to send the other women off to find soft clay by the shores of the lake then went back to her tent and rummaged through her bags. She pulled out pots of minerals crushed into fine powder, golden charms, earrings set with rubies and emeralds. With the help of Bashar, the old cook, she fashioned a playing board from the clay, rolling it flat with the stone he used to form the thin loaves of bread.

She showed her sisters in the harem how to sculpt pawns, bishops, and rooks, setting everything in the hot oven to bake while they slept away the hottest part of the day. When it cooled, she divided the playing board into 64 squares, leaving some squares the natural color of the clay. Every other square, she painted with the kohl and oil mixture the women used to accentuate their eyes. Na’ Ima rubbed kohl onto one set of figurines while Bree tinted the others with the henna. Finally, she adorned the rooks, bishops, kings, and queens with gold and jewels stripped from her royal adornments.

When darkness fell, a messenger came to their tent, informing the women the sultaan required their presence. Bree had dressed in her finest robes, covering her wrists and fingers with bangles and rings. She wore an amber necklace that hung halfway to her waist, arranged in size from beads as small as pearls to enormous nearly-translucent chunks that seemed to glow from within in the firelight. Around her throat was a gold chain set with precious stones.

She packed the chess pieces in a silver box from her saddlebag,

and Dasheena arranged for a small boy to carry in the chessboard. When they entered his tent, Tahraz wasted no time coming to the point. "We will eat...and then you will entertain me," he proclaimed as Bree followed Dasheena in.

She stepped forward. "If it pleases the suiltan, I have a gift for you...in gratitude for saving the life of the Queen of Sheba. Your companions have been kind enough to help me create this tribute to your bravery, your goodness, and your mercy."

Bree knew she could never go wrong pandering to a man's desire for praise, for everything from saving someone's life to taking out the trash. The suiltan did not disappoint her. Nodding his head slightly as if to acknowledge the truth of her words, he beckoned her to come forward. "Present your gift," he replied graciously.

Bree gestured to the young boy. He bowed then laid the chessboard on a small stone table near Tahraz's chaise. The suiltan's eyes lit up. Bree held out the silver chest with both hands, head lowered. He took it, turning the box around and around to examine the etched surface.

Too late, she remembered it was decorated with the explicitly erotic images the Sabateans were so fond of creating. Interspersed with plants and flowers and animals were scenes of people enjoying sex in every imaginable position. He looked up at Bree, raised one eyebrow then opened the box. She kept her head bowed, too embarrassed to make eye contact.

Tahraz removed the chess pieces, examining each one in great detail. When the last piece had been unpacked, he looked back at Bree. "I have never seen a gift such as this. Please, tell me about it."

"This is a game of strategy my people play," she explained. "It is a test of skill and daring. Each side has a king who must be protected at all cost. If you will permit," she went on, gesturing to one of the pieces.

He handed it to her. Bree went into the speech she had rehearsed, describing each piece and the role it played.

"In this contest, there is one piece more powerful than all the others," she finished. "It is the queen. As in my land, the queen is

respected by her people and regarded as formidable by her foes. She alone moves as she pleases around the board, in any and all directions. But even the queen is vulnerable. If she is not vigilant, she may be taken down by a lowly pawn...and a lowly pawn may, through skill and daring, advance to become a queen in her own right.”

Tahraz listened intently. Bree could see he was intrigued.

“We will dine and then you will show me how this game is played.”

“If it pleases the sultaan,” Bree murmured, keeping her head bowed so he would not see the triumph in her eyes.

Once again, Bashar brought in a huge tray. He managed to catch her eye and winked again. It was clear she’d won his respect in their games that morning.

After the meal, Bree set up the board, naming each piece as she did and demonstrating the moves it could make. Tahraz frowned when he learned the king could only move one square at a time, while the queen had free rein to go in any direction, attacking soldiers on horseback and the wise counselors called bishops, as well as the queen and king of her enemies.

They played a practice game, with Bree explaining the strategy behind each move. He frowned even more deeply when she checkmated his king.

“We will play again,” he declared. “Dasheena, take the other women away. Tonight I will learn this game given to me by the Queen of Sheba. Then tomorrow, we will have a contest.”

* * *

Dasheena bowed and backed out of the room, followed by the other women. Tahraz scarcely noticed. His attention was on the board, and he asked many questions as they moved through the plays of another game. His mind was sharp, and it did not take long for him to recognize the strategy behind the moves...how to set a trap for a king or the tactic of sacrificing a piece to gain the advantage elsewhere on the board.

As they played, he began to look at Bree through different eyes.

Far from being merely an exotic beauty from a foreign land, he found the female's intelligence as appealing as her fiery spirit. He sensed she would be a formidable opponent, and his combative nature was engaged. He'd seen her pleasing form, experienced her passionate response to his touch. But the discovery that she had a mind capable of such intricate plotting intrigued him. *I may not defeat her as easily as I first imagined. But it will only make my eventual conquest of her that much sweeter.*

* * *

They played for hours. Tahraz's mind was a sponge, soaking up knowledge as fast as Bree could deliver it. His quick grasp of the intricacies of the game amazed her. This man could have walked into the boardroom of an international corporation or the war room of a modern-day world power and held his own.

The faint light of dawn was creeping over the mountains when he finally pushed the board aside. "This game pleases me," he announced. "We will play again. Tonight." He waved Bree off, and she backed out of the tent as she had seen the other women do.

Dasheena was awake when she crept into the women's tent. "You did well, Queen Bilquis," she whispered. "Tahraz was truly pleased with your gift. I have not seen him so interested in anything for many moons."

Bree smiled. "I thank you for your help, Dasheena. Without you and your sisters, I could not have created it so quickly – or so skillfully." Wearily, she curled up on a rug in the corner and closed her eyes.

When she woke, the sun had already begun to drop behind the mountains to the west. Once again, the women were bustling around in the tent, preparing themselves to be presented to their suiltaan. They gossiped about daily life in the oasis, teased each other about who would be chosen that night.

There didn't seem to be any jealousy among them, which surprised Bree. She'd always thought women in a harem were sworn rivals, fiercely competing for the attention of their sultan. But these women treated each other with kindness, even affection.

Bree pulled Dasheena aside. "You treat each other lovingly, as sisters. Are you not in conflict, each seeking to be the favorite?"

Dasheena laughed, her dark eyes sparkling. "I have heard from my sisters who come from other lands that in some places, both men and women sometimes battle to be the sole object of affection of their beloved. We all know that one day Tahraz will choose one woman to be his suiltaana. Then he will no longer have need of this hareem. He will allow us the choice of staying here and being treated as members of his family or being given as wife to another."

"And he chooses your husband?"

Dasheena looked surprised. "Of course. He is our master. Our fathers gave us to the suiltan instead of choosing a husband for us. Now the responsibility is his. If he does not want one of us as his wife, then he will choose the man to whom we will give our obedience and our devotion for the rest of our lives."

"And until then, he...uh...enjoys being with all of you?" Bree was embarrassed, not sure how to go on with her questions.

Dasheena smiled. "The suiltan is a handsome man, Queen Bilquis, strong and virile. It is our pleasure to serve him in every way...and he is skilled at the art of giving pleasure to us as well."

"But he punishes you, spans you, forces you to do whatever he wants."

"We are punished only when we displease him. We live in his mercy, wanting for nothing. Our lives are good. Obeying his commands is our duty...and our joy."

Bree shook her head. The lot of a woman in this tribal life was a far cry from the freedom women enjoyed in Mahrib. But at its core, Bree reminded herself, ancient Sabataea was no different. Even Bilquis, with all the power of a sovereign, had been on her way to meet a husband chosen for her by her father's family.

As a student of ancient life, Bree knew all the logical reasons why civilizations had evolved to give the male the more powerful role. He needed to protect the family unit from enemies, both wild and human, insuring survival of his progeny. His larger body size and increased muscle mass gave him superior strength. He was always ready for

battle, unlike a female who might be pregnant or nursing a helpless infant.

But, as a woman, Bree railed at the injustice. Dasheena acted as if she was happy to submit to the sultaan. What would make a woman willingly kneel before a man, declare it was her joy to please him? Was it purely his sexual prowess? She thought about the look she'd seen on Dasheena's face when she spoke of her sultaan.

It's love.

The thought popped into Bree's head. She immediately dismissed it. She'd never really been in love. Not the giddy, starstruck kind in cheap romance novels. Certainly not the boring variety, where the couple pledge their undying love then fall into the daily grind of children and chores, never to speak of it again.

She'd thought she was in love with James, the professor overseeing her graduate studies. But he'd only proven her theory that saying "I love you" was just another tool males used to maintain power over females. In her opinion, love was an illusion women had bought into through the centuries because it made their lives of subservience bearable.

She dressed for the evening and followed Dasheena into the sultaan's tent, dropping to her knees and then sitting back on her heels as the other women did.

Tahraz was striding up and down in front of the fire brazier, his expression grim.

"I am displeased. One of you has ignored my commands, straying from the boundaries of our home and venturing into the mountains alone."

The women exchanged worried glances. One of them began speaking. "If it pleases the sultaan..."

"No, it does *not* please the sultaan," he roared. "Silence! There is no excuse for such behavior. You could have been injured, even killed. The mountains are dangerous, full of wild creatures and poisonous snakes, to say nothing of unstable slopes where you could break a leg and then die of exposure waiting for someone to find you."

He stopped pacing. "Suhailah, come forward." His tone was flat.

The blue-eyed woman who had spoken rose and haltingly made her way to stand before the sultaan.

“You will assume the position. Dasheena, Na’ Ima, assist her.”

Suhailah dropped to her knees. Dasheena and Na’ Ima knelt on either side of her, reaching out to strip off her robe and reveal the flimsy garment she wore underneath, held up by the festive band encircling her hips. Unbidden, Suhailah bent forward, her head touching the carpet.

Dasheena pulled up the nearly transparent skirt to expose her bottom, tucking the ends of the fabric under her belt. Suhailah willingly brought her arms behind her back, grasping one wrist tightly with her other hand. Na’ Ima took the veil off her head and used it to tie Suhailah’s hands together.

Tahraz picked up a flat wooden board, smacking it against his thigh as he moved into place behind her. It made a resounding *crack*. Bree jumped in spite of herself. She remembered all too well the pain and embarrassment she’d felt in that situation. Without another word, Tahraz drew back his arm and gave Suhailah a harsh smack.

She cried out. Tahraz paddled her again. Bree saw Dasheena wince and avert her eyes, but she did not leave her position. Apparently the sultaan required that all the women of his harem witness a punishment when it was doled out, perhaps to deter future misbehavior by the others. By the third whack, Suhailah was sobbing openly, begging the sultaan for mercy and swearing to obey his every wish in the future.

The sultaan, unmoved by her pleas, continued her punishment. He paddled every inch of her bottom until it glowed bright red. Suhailah’s tears flowed, but she knelt, unmoving, her ass lifted high in the air.

Finally, he threw the board on the ground. Bree thought the discipline was over, but Tahraz barked another command in a dialect Bree couldn’t understand. Suhailah let out a loud wail and began struggling. Na’ Ima and Dasheena pinned her shoulders down so she couldn’t move.

Tahraz spoke again, a single word. Crying pitifully, Suhailah

spread her legs wider. Bree recognized the position as the same one the women had assumed at her temple on the night of the festival. Was the sultaan planning to take her now, with everyone looking on?

He knelt behind her, running his hand possessively between her thighs. Then he pulled something out of a pocket in his robe. It looked like a small phallus. Tahraz began working the object into her bottom hole, slowly sliding it in and out while she begged him to stop, making wild promises and swearing she would never disobey him again.

“Be silent, or I will begin your punishment anew,” he thundered. She let out a harsh gasp as he rammed the object inside her, but did not protest again.

Tahraz stood up. “Now we will dine,” he announced. He sat on the chaise without looking at the half-naked woman crouched near his feet and beckoned Dasheena and Na’ Ima to bring him his food.

Bree was horrified. She couldn’t help glancing over from time to time as Suhailah struggled to stay in position, her naked rear high in the air with the end of the strange object protruding from her bottom hole. When Dasheena was finally relieved of her duty to feed her master, Bree leaned over. “What is that?” she whispered. “And why does she act as though it causes her pain?”

“It is an object the sultaan carved from a root we use to add spice to our food,” Dasheena replied softly. “If Tahraz is sorely displeased, he inserts this tool into the bottom hole of the woman being punished. The juices of the root make her tingle and burn inside the same way her cheeks are burning from the stroke of his paddle. The longer it remains inside her, the more powerful the sensation grows. Her body struggles with the need to expel the object, but she has been forbidden to move. To save herself from another spanking, her only choice is to clench it tightly within her. But that makes the fire burn even hotter. Although the harsh sting fades once it is removed, the shame of being publicly chastised in this way lingers on.”

From Dasheena’s explanation, Bree guessed the phallus had been fashioned from a finger of ginger root. She had read about its more unusual uses. Victorian horsemen swore a tired old nag could be sold

for a better price with a plug of ginger shoved up its backside. The animal would act like a frisky colt, prancing around from the fiery sensation it caused. She knew fingers of ginger were used occasionally on females as well. Some said it heightened sexual arousal. Others used it to increase humiliation and pain in the unlucky recipient. Dasheena's description of the effects had been so detailed, Bree couldn't help wondering if she, too, had been punished that way.

Suhailah was panting and trembling from the effort it took for her to remain still. Tahraz glanced down at her, and Bree thought she saw compassion in his eyes. He clapped his hands and waved the other women away. As Bree followed her sisters out of the room, he knelt and began removing the plug. The last thing she saw was the suiltan taking the tearful woman in his arms, murmuring softly in her ear as his hands caressed her reddened ass.

Dasheena began talking the minute they left his presence. "Tahraz is not a cruel man," she hastened to explain. "He only acts as he did out of his affection for us. He has the duty of caring for the entire tribe. The injury or loss of even one member through misfortune or a deliberate disregard for his laws is a terrible burden for him to bear."

Bree was silent, but her expression was one of disbelief. Dasheena went on. "Tahraz is strict, but he is not unfair. Suhailah wanted to help her youngest brother. He is one of the shepherds. She ventured deep into the hills to find his lost lamb and save him from being punished for his carelessness in tending the flock. Tahraz was aware of that. But she knew the dangers of setting out alone into the wilderness and the penalty for disobedience. If Tahraz did not punish her, others would soon begin to pick and choose which of his laws to follow and which to ignore."

"What will happen to her now?" Bree asked.

"The suiltan will comfort her and dry her tears. She will say she is sorry and swear never to displease him again. The suiltan will forgive her, and all will be as it was."

Bree shook her head. Was Tahraz a tyrant or merely a strict father to his tribe? Though he seemed cold, perhaps his attitude had been

shaped by the constant struggle to keep his people alive in the harsh desert world that surrounded them. The man was an enigma. But she needed to learn all she could about him if she was to succeed with her plan to escape from the isolated oasis.

The next evening, Tahraz was eager to play a real game of chess. When Bree walked into the tent, the board was already set up. They ate their evening meal with the usual musical accompaniment. Then he excused the others and beckoned Bree to come forward.

She approached, head bowed.

“We shall have a proper game now,” Tahraz announced.

She sat down opposite him on the rug, tucking her feet under her robe. “Did I mention that in my country it is customary for the players to put forth a small wager on the outcome?”

Tahraz took the bait, as she knew he would.

“What are the usual terms of such wagers?”

“Each player might offer an object of value, to be given as a trophy to the victor. Or the wager might take the form of some act to be performed, which will show favor to the winner and humble the vanquished opponent.”

“Indeed?” His gaze settled on her, cool and appraising. “That sounds intriguing. Let us make a wager. What would you propose?”

Bree had spent hours planning her response. “To make it a fair contest, I suggest we play a tournament. Five games, each with a small wager on the results...and a final prize to the overall victor.”

Tahraz was silent, considering. “Agreed. Each game shall have its stakes determined on the night it is played...and the winner shall choose when and where to collect his prize.”

“Or *her* prize,” Bree replied. “Shall we take some time to consider the nature of the ultimate prize each of us is willing to risk?”

Tahraz shook his head. His voice was low, and his words sent a shiver down Bree’s spine. “I need no time to decide. When I become champion, you will come forward at my command and remove your robes and veil. Then you will kneel before me and display yourself in the manner Suhailah did. You will willingly submit as I punish you –

or pleasure you – in whatever manner I desire.”

For Bree, there was no downside to the wager. Tahraz would eventually force her into obedience if she remained here. At least this way, if she was clever enough, she had a chance to keep her body and her self-respect intact.

She pretended to consider his proposal.

“I accept your terms. And I, too, am prepared to set forth my stakes. If I am victorious, you will release me from captivity. You will provide me with armed guards and provisions as befits my status as a queen. I will be escorted safely back to my kingdom of Mahrib – and you will give me a female companion of my choosing from your hareem to accompany me on the journey.”

His eyes grew dark with rage. Bree stared back at him defiantly, determined to show no fear. She knew the next few moments would decide her fate.

Tahraz struggled to control his temper. Then he gave her a cold smile.

“This will be an amusing contest. I agree to your terms. Let the games begin.”

Chapter Seven

Bree took a pawn in each hand and put her arms behind her back, transferring them back and forth between her hands. Then she held out both arms, fists closed.

“Normally in this game, one set of characters is white and the other black. But I had no white powder with which to color the pieces. So, if it pleases the sultaan, in our contest, red will have the opening move. Choose a hand.”

Tahraz nodded and tapped Bree’s left hand. She opened it to reveal a black pawn, placed it on the board and gave the board a half-turn so the sultaan sat behind his pieces. “Red will begin,” she announced, advancing the red queen’s pawn two squares.

Bree played cautiously, keeping her face as expressionless as if they were in a high stakes game of Texas Hold-em. Tahraz studied the board before each move, keeping hold of his pieces as he shifted them around the board before settling on the final placement and leaning back. He raised one eyebrow when Bree captured the first pawn.

“We failed to name a wager for this game,” he remarked offhandedly, as if the thought had just occurred to him. “What will you offer as a prize?”

Bree smiled. “I have seen that you are a wise ruler, one who prizes knowledge. I offer you a priceless gift,” she replied. “If you are the victor, I will perform for you one of the most sacred rituals in my land. As Queen of Sheba, I am high priestess of the Great Temple in Mahrib. I preside over the ancient ceremony that beseeches the gods to grant us fertile fields for our crops, fertile wombs for our women – and rigid shafts for our men. I will share with you our secret rite, standing before you dressed as I do to please the gods, and sing the songs from our temple.”

Tahraz’s interest was aroused, as she knew it would be. “That is a worthy prize indeed. I look forward to seeing it. As for me,” he went on, “I, too, will offer a gift of knowledge. If you are the victor in this first contest, I will take you on a very special journey...to a hidden

place. I will reveal to you what remains of the great city that was once home to all the desert tribes, before our world became a barren wasteland.”

Bree was astonished. A great city lying in ruins? Ancient texts she had studied made reference to a powerful kingdom that existed long ago deep in what was now the middle of the desert. It was rumored to be older than Sabataea, even older than Plato’s lost continent of Atlantis. Most scholars believed it was a myth. Tahraz was offering to take her there.

With every day that goes by, this bizarre experience of living as Queen of Sheba becomes more real to me. I don’t know if I’ll ever get back to being Doctor Sabrina Dennison. But the chance to explore the most ancient city on earth is one I’d trade my modern life for in a heartbeat.

“Your wager is a prize I would be honored to earn,” she replied.

They both played with renewed vigor, attacking and defending as the game progressed. Bree couldn’t resist giving him a triumphant smile when she finally trapped Tahraz’s king. “By the way,” she remarked, “my people have given names to various opening moves and the strategies that accompany each one. The tactic I used is known as ‘The Queen’s Gambit.’”

Tahraz laid his king on its side, conceding defeat. “Well played, Queen Bilquis. Tomorrow, at daybreak, we leave on our journey.” He rose, indicating the evening was over.

Bree was so excited she couldn’t sleep. Back in the women’s tent, she repacked her saddlebags, taking several changes of clothing. Tahraz had never said how long the journey would last. She’d managed to drift off for what seemed like only a few minutes when Dasheena shook her awake.

“The suiltan is preparing to leave. He has sent me to bring you to him.”

Rubbing her eyes, Bree sat up. She’d never seen Dasheena so excited.

“It is a great honor the suiltan has bestowed upon you,” Dasheena proclaimed. “You are to ride beside him on this journey, on

his favorite mare, Ashana. The two of you. Alone. No servants, no guards. The place he takes you to is sacred to our people. Only our ruler is allowed to set foot there. You must have pleased him very much with your game.”

“I beat him fair and square, Dasheena. This trip is my prize for winning.”

Dasheena looked worried. “Be careful, Queen Bilquis. Like all men, Tahraz does not like to lose. He will eventually extract a price for your victory – one you may not want to pay.”

It was still dark when she followed Dasheena to the corral. Tahraz was tying a bulging saddlebag to the camel she’d ridden into the desert. Another camel stood nearby, loaded with supplies. He took Bree’s saddlebags, tossing them over the back of a beautiful white Arabian horse. The coal-black stallion he’d been riding when he rescued her snorted and tossed its head impatiently.

Nervously, Bree allowed him to help her onto Ashana’s back. She tucked her robes around her legs, squeezing her thighs together against the mare’s flanks. She’d only been on a horse a handful of times, never riding bareback. Tahraz adjusted the reins around Ashana’s head, then handed over control to Bree. He vaulted onto the back of his prancing stallion, gave the horse a slight nudge, and headed toward the western mountains, with Bree and the two camels trailing along behind.

Once they were out of sight of the compound, Tahraz reined in his horse and waited for Bree to come up beside him. Then he picked up the pace. They reached the foothills as dawn broke, following a rough path that wound steadily upward.

When they came to a sharp bend in the trail, Tahraz stopped. He whistled, mimicking the song of a bird Bree couldn’t identify. There was an answering whistle from somewhere in the distance. He nodded and led her around the corner.

They’d arrived at the mouth of a narrow pass between the rocky western peaks of the mountain range surrounding the oasis. Two men rode toward them on camels, swathed in the long white robes worn by all the desert dwellers. When they got close, the men slid off their

camels, bowing from the waist.

“All is well, Suiltaan,” one of the men intoned.

“May the gods shower you with blessings in thanks for your service to our people,” Tahraz replied.

“It is our pleasure to do the bidding of the suiltaan,” the man answered.

Tahraz took Ashana’s reins from Bree and led the horses in single file along the narrow trail, followed by the camels. To their left, a barren cliff rose high above them. On the right, the ground fell sharply, ending in a dry riverbed far below.

“Those men are part of the army that surrounds and protects our al ain,” he explained as they picked their way along the trail. “They keep vigil here in the mountains and see to it that no enemy, be it beast or human, can get through to bring danger to our people.”

“They live out here?” Bree was incredulous.

“They remain at their posts for seven days and nights before being relieved by another team. Their camels carry enough food and water for each man and his mount to survive for that length of time. Still, the nights are long and the days longer in the sun’s relentless heat. After seven days, their bodies are weary and their wits dull. The safety of my people is best served by replacing them with fresh eyes and ears.”

“What do they do if strangers approach?”

“They do what they must.”

Bree shivered, despite the growing heat. She pictured bodies crashing to their death in the canyon hundreds of feet below. Not trusting the natural barrier surrounding his oasis, Tahraz had fortified his isolated kingdom with human shields. Were there many souls out there, roaming the barren wasteland, seeking the liquid gold his oasis had in abundance?

Once they’d gone through the pass and were heading down the foothills on the other side, Tahraz picked up the pace. Bree hung on to the reins for dear life, leaning forward on the neck of her mare and gripping Ashana’s mane as she did on her runaway camel.

Beside her, Tahraz sat astride his stallion easily. He looked every

inch a desert sheik, white robes billowing behind him as they galloped across the sand. The coeds in her classes back in Chicago would have described him as hot, with his rugged sun-bronzed face and startling blue eyes that gleamed wickedly every time he looked at her, as though he could see right through her robes.

Hours passed, and the sun rose higher in the sky, turning the desert into an inferno. The air seared their lungs with every breath. Tahraz pointed and shouted something, but his words were swept away by the wind. She strained her eyes. In the distance, Bree saw the outline of massive boulders strewn here and there in the sand, like a handful of pebbles tossed by a child.

As they drew nearer, the mounds took shape. Man-made structures appeared, revealed by the relentless shifting of the sands even as other buildings were slowly swallowed up. Tahraz gave his mount a swift kick, and the horse galloped faster, heading straight for an opening in one of the ruins. Ashana was determined to follow, and Bree ducked her head just in time to miss smacking it on a low doorway as her horse charged into the dim enclosure.

Tahraz had already dismounted, rummaging in his saddlebags, he got out a goatskin flask and poured water into a wooden bowl. His grateful steed drank greedily. Turning, he lifted Bree off her horse.

She practically fell into his arms, dizzy and weak from the heat. He steadied her on her feet, holding the flask to her lips, and then refilled the wooden bowl with water for her horse. Bree examined her surroundings. They stood in a cavernous room with a high ceiling, its farthest corners disappearing into darkness. The temperature was blessedly lower inside, the crushing heat blocked by three-foot-thick mud brick walls that were slowly being buried by the sand.

“We rest now,” he announced, pulling the woven blanket from Ashana’s back and laying it out on the floor for Bree. She sank to her knees, barely acknowledging him when Tahraz handed her a pouch filled with sweet dates and nuts, the same food that made up every daytime meal she’d eaten while traveling with her caravan. Bree managed to chew and swallow a handful of the mix before curling up on the blanket and closing her weary eyes. She was asleep in less than

a minute.

She awoke with a start. Hours had passed; she didn't know how many. But the light coming through the open doorway was softer now. She heard a noise and turned. Ashana was tethered to an iron spike that protruded from the wall at the other end of the room. She tossed her head and blew out a breath. The black stallion was tied to another ring nearby. Bree swore the male was watching Ashana with the same lustful expression she'd seen in Tahraz's eyes when he announced the terms of his ultimate wager.

The suiltaan appeared in the doorway. "Ah, you are awake. Good. I will show you something of this place. Later, we dine under the stars."

While she slept, Tahraz had seen to the needs of the animals and built a fire outside the room. She could see a clay baking dish like the ones Bashar used, only much smaller, nestled in the hot coals. Apparently, in his world, even a suiltaan with a retinue of servants learned basic domestic skills.

Here in this stark, lonely place, he looked more relaxed than he ever did in his lavish tent in the oasis, despite the fact that he probably hadn't slept at all. Bree took the hand he offered, and he led her out the door.

The setting sun threw some of the buildings around her into shadow, while highlighting others with its slanting rays. They walked along a narrow pathway. Utter silence surrounded them. Then, faintly, Bree became aware of the desert wind whispering and sighing, of the sand humming softly as it shifted in the empty streets, like the echo of an ancient hymn. Her eyes lit up, entranced by the spectacle laid out before them.

The abandoned city was vast. Bree could see the tops of multi-story buildings poking out of the dunes while, in other places, the desert wind had swept the sand clear, exposing everything down to the ancient stone streets. They wandered aimlessly, sometimes pausing so Bree could examine an inscription or a carved relief on one of the structures. Tahraz was delighted by her enthusiasm. He answered her

endless stream of questions, repeating legends handed down through the centuries about the place he called the motherland of all the desert tribes.

The symbols etched on the stone blocks were like none Bree had ever seen. “This language is even more ancient than Sumerian cuneiform,” she marveled, running her fingers over one set of shapes. Suddenly, she had a wild thought. “Can you read this?”

“Alas, there is no one left alive who knows their meaning,” Tahraz replied. “But some records need no scribe to interpret them. Come. I will show you.”

He led her to one of the largest buildings still visible. An enormous doorway yawned open at the top of a wide flight of stairs. The doors had long since disappeared. Inside, the layout reminded Bree of the ancient temple site she’d been excavating in Mahrib.

Tahraz pointed to a carved frieze all around the cavernous room, just below the ceiling. Bree twirled, taking it in. Protected from the elements, even the paint had survived. Herds of brightly colored animals roamed a vast green savannah split by a dazzling blue river. Bands of hunters followed the animals. Some of the creatures lay on the ground, with arrows or spears protruding from their backs. Others were depicted in motion. The artists had been so skilled, Bree could almost see the beasts move – gazelles bounding, lions pouncing, zebras galloping.

“Nothing like this has ever been seen, ever imagined,” she whispered in awe. “This site dates back long before Greek or Roman art, millennia before the first Egyptian pyramid broke ground. Skilled artists sculpting in stone, bringing three-dimensional life to the animals depicted in the cave paintings of our earliest ancestors.” She turned to Tahraz. “There are creatures here I don’t even recognize!”

* * *

Tahraz stood in the shadows, studying the animated woman before him. When he first found her, Bilquis had impressed him with the courage she’d shown alone in the desert. Once in the hareem, her defiant spirit aroused his manhood. She’d proven herself a worthy opponent with a sharp mind, besting him in their first real game of

chess.

But he'd never before seen her in a moment of pure joy. She was radiant.

At that moment, he wanted desperately to see the look on her face when he drove her again and again to the peak of desire, and finally took her soaring over the top.

Later, after their evening meal, they sat in companionable silence in front of the fire, gazing up into the heavens. Bree turned to Tahraz. "Tell me another tale of your ancestors," she urged.

Tahraz thought for a moment then began the account of a young hunter he described as an ancestor of his who lived so far in the past that the days had not yet been numbered. He told of the wonders of this holy city and how, long ago, a wicked ruler turned his back on the gods and bade the people worship him alone. Of how the gods in turn cursed the land with a great drought lasting for many years and driving the wildlife away. The young hunter beseeched the gods for help. They spoke to him, answering his prayers. He listened to their message and, in a desperate attempt to save the lives of those he loved, gathered up his people, leading them through the ever-growing desert to follow the herds.

Tahraz went on with his tale, telling her many of the little band perished from exhaustion and thirst. Of how when the others grew too weak to carry on, the young man trekked onward through the harsh terrain alone, near death, trusting that the gods would be merciful – and trusting also that the instincts of the animals he tracked would lead them eventually to water. He told her of the moment the young hunter crawled with the last of his strength to the top of a mountain and gazed down for the first time on a lush green valley with the life-giving waters of an oasis shimmering like a jewel in its center – and how the grateful survivors he led there proclaimed that he and his heirs would evermore be known as sultaan of this paradise he had discovered.

* * *

Tahraz told the story in the cadence of rhyme, an ancient Odyssey committed to memory. As she listened, Bree looked up to the heavens,

at the dazzling array of stars, and marveled at the resilience of the human spirit. She gained a new respect for Tahraz as he recounted the tale, realizing that, for him, it was not just a story, but a constant reminder of the responsibility he bore to care for the descendants of the people who had put their faith, their trust, even their very lives in the hands of his forefather.

“Your ancestor was indeed a good and wise sultaan,” she said when he fell silent at last. She repeated a traditional refrain. “May the gods bless you as they blessed your baba and his baba before him.”

Tahraz bowed his head and then took a long pull from the flask of fruit-and-honey liqueur at his feet. He offered it to Bree. Remembering the potent effects of the drink, she took a cautious sip.

“I thank you for this precious gift, for sharing your most holy city with me,” she said solemnly. “It is truly a prize beyond price.”

“I am happy it pleases you. You value knowledge more than any female I have ever known,” he added, sounding surprised.

“Knowledge is a tool that can be used to help us survive, as it did the first sultaan,” she replied. “He trusted his life and the lives of his people to his knowledge of the ways of the herd. In other circumstances, knowledge can be a weapon. Knowing the skills and weaknesses of an enemy helps a warrior bring him down as surely as does a spear.”

“You, too, are a wise ruler, Queen Bilquis,” Tahraz responded. “I look forward with pleasure to our next match in your game of chess.”

To her surprise, Tahraz had treated her with the utmost respect, making neither demands nor even suggestions of any behavior that would affect her position as a woman betrothed to another. He suggested she retire for the night, telling her he would sleep outside, near the fire, to keep watch over the horses and camels. Although they’d seen no signs of life since they entered the complex, Bree knew he was concerned as much for her safety as for the animals.

“We will walk again through the city when dawn breaks,” he announced. “Then, after resting during the heat of the day, we will travel back to the al ain by the stars, making our way in the light of the moon.”

Bree slept, dreaming of crowds going about their daily lives in the streets. She heard their laughter and snippets of their songs, watched eager young men pursue innocent maidens, wooing them with flowers and wine. She dreamed of one handsome young man taking his beloved into the desert night and awakening her desire there under the stars. He undressed her slowly, tongue following hands as he explored her body. The young woman closed her eyes, overcome with passion.

The dream changed, and Bree became the woman. She opened her eyes – and the face she saw was that of Tahraz as he drove himself deep inside her. She came with a wild cry that echoed in the cavernous room even as she woke.

Before she could draw another breath, Bree found herself once again with the suiltaan's hands roaming over her body.

“Are you hurt? Were you stung by a scorpion or an adder?”

Bree struggled to a sitting position. “No, no, I am well,” she protested. “It was only a dream.”

By the faint glow of the fire outside, she caught a gleam in his eyes. “What sort of dream would cause you to cry out in that manner?”

Bree was grateful for the darkness, hoping it would hide her embarrassment. “I...I dreamt of the lion attacking my caravan.”

“All is well, Queen Bilquis,” he said, his voice low. “There is nothing to fear here – unless you fear being alone with me?”

She lowered her eyes, afraid he would see the answer in them. “The suiltaan is a kind and generous host. My people will burn many offerings to the gods in thanks for your goodness to me when I return home.”

* * *

Tahraz had been dozing fitfully, one part of him always aware of the movement and sounds of the animals nearby. When he slept, he, too, had dreamed of love and lust. Of a passionate, pliant Bilquis writhing beneath him.

When he heard the scream, he lay motionless for a moment, thinking it was part of his dream. Then reason took over, and he

dashed into the room.

Awake or asleep, Tahraz knew a cry of passion from one of distress. But, rather than express his doubt about her explanation, he merely nodded to acknowledge her thanks. "Come, I will brew us some tea. Soon it will be dawn, and we can stroll once again through the streets."

* * *

Grateful for the distraction, Bree rose and followed him outside to sit by the dying embers of the fire. Still deep in the dream, her body had responded instantly to the sultaan's roving hands. She watched those hands as he crushed mint leaves into a pot, adding water and placing it on the hot coals. Her mind replayed the final moments just before she woke – his naked body gleaming in the moonlight as he bent his head to kiss his way down her body, then his tongue, relentlessly driving her higher before he rose over her...

She shook her head. Better to think of something else.

It was Dr. Sabrina Dennison, the scholar, who accompanied Tahraz when they once again explored the deserted streets. She wished for a camera, or even a notebook and pencil to record the incredible images all around her. She did her best to commit everything she saw to memory. The discovery of this site would shatter conventional beliefs about when and where the rise of civilization occurred.

Once again, Tahraz served as her guide, patiently waiting when she fell to her knees to brush the sand from a statue for a better look or muttering to herself as she traced an inscription. "That looks similar to the earliest Egyptian hieroglyph for water, and surely this must mean king or ruler..."

Too soon, the vicious heat drove them back to the building where they'd set up camp. As he did the day before, Tahraz brought the horses in to shield them as well. Even the camels got a reprieve from the intense rays of the sun.

"Let me keep watch," Bree urged. "You've had little rest, and our journey will be long."

Tahraz lay down, but Bree could tell he barely slept. Though his

breathing was slow and regular, he never stirred, and she could tell that at some level he was aware of everything around him.

His eyes were closed, and she took advantage of the opportunity to stare openly. He'd taken off the white cloth covering his head. After two days away from home, a sexy dark stubble covered his chiseled jawline. Bree fought the impulse to twine her fingers in his long dark hair like she did when he made love to her in her dream, gripping as fiercely as she had Ashana's mane when they galloped through the desert. She wondered if Tahraz had a tender side, or if gentleness had been burned out of him by the cruel sun. Even in an oasis, life was hard in this unforgiving climate.

* * *

Tahraz opened his eyes to find Bree watching him, with the same look of desire in her eyes she'd had in his dream.

He moved without thinking. One hand drew her down onto his chest, while the other swept aside the veil covering her face. Looking into her eyes, he brought his lips to hers, softly at first. When her mouth opened slightly, welcoming him, he groaned. The raw sound seemed to bring her back to her senses. She struggled against him to escape.

Tahraz tightened his grip, deepening the kiss. Then, abruptly, he let her go. "I may punish you for disobedience, but I will not take you by force. My captive queen will kneel before me willingly when the time comes, offering her body to me to use as I choose. For I know this about you. When you lose, your pride will require that you keep your word and honor your final wager...as I have honored mine, bringing you here to our holy city."

Bree pulled the veil back over her face, hands shaking. "First, you must win the contest," she replied.

Tahraz watched her struggle for control of her emotions. Winning a game required planning, strategy. There were many moves – not all of them within the squares of a clay board. He knew women...and queen or not, this was a woman whose desire had been awakened. Now he had only to build that hunger until she herself begged him to

take her and end her torment.

* * *

For Bree, the long journey back to the oasis flew by. Her mind was in a whirl. First, from the amazing sights she'd seen in Tahraz's lost city. But warring for her attention were the conflicting feelings she had for her captor.

The suiltaan was a stern patriarch. But he was also a scholar, with a thorough knowledge of the history of his people. In chess, he'd proven to be a quick study with a keen mind. She respected him as a worthy adversary. And she had seen flashes of what he would be like as a lover – savage and sensuous, claiming his woman with raw passion.

But something inside her railed at the idea of becoming another eager concubine in his harem. Whether as the world-renowned archaeologist Dr. Sabrina Dennison or as Bilquis, Queen of Sheba, Bree promised herself it would be a cold day in the desert before she willingly knelt and spread her legs for such an arrogant male.

To Bree's surprise, Tahraz did not immediately call for a rematch when they returned to the al ain. Instead, he practically ignored her.

Days passed, one blending into the next, often ending with lavish meals at which women of the harem would sing or dance or play instruments before one was chosen as the object of the suiltaan's attention for the night. Other times, the women were left to their own devices. Bashar would appear outside their tent with a huge covered dish, and they were free to indulge themselves without having to wait on any man.

The old cook would often sneak them a special treat – a warm loaf filled with sweet, dried fruit soaked in the potent honey liqueur. Dasheena and the others sometimes treated him like a beloved grandfather and other times flirted coyly, as though he was a virile young warrior. Bashar loved the attention.

Ever the professor, Bree entertained her sisters on those nights with stories of life in Mahrib. The women showed endless curiosity about life outside their isolated realm, and she soon ran out of

descriptions of Sabataean customs. She began recounting the legends of the ancient city that Tahraz shared with her, adding characters, weaving tales of love and adventure.

Finally, Tahraz sent word that Bilquis and Na' Ima had been selected to spend the evening with him. When the women presented themselves, they found the chessboard set up once again. After they dined, Tahraz motioned for Bree to take her place in front of the board. He waved his arm and Na' Ima picked up two pawns from the board then put her hands behind her back.

Bree smiled. Tahraz had obviously planned the evening in advance, even going so far as to coach Na' Ima on what to do.

"You were the victor in our last match," he said, "so the choice is yours."

Na' Ima brought her hands out from behind her back. Bree tapped the left fist. When Na' Ima opened her hand to reveal a black pawn, Tahraz couldn't hide his delight. To Bree's surprise, he opened with her strategy from the previous game, mimicking her moves as though he had memorized each one.

"And what shall be our wager on tonight's outcome?" Tahraz asked as he moved a bishop into play, capturing one of her pawns.

"I will wager the most rare and valuable substance in all the wealth my kingdom has to offer. It is called frankincense, burned as a holy offering to the gods, harvested from trees that grow in only one place on earth. These trees exist on the harsh and barren slopes of our mountains, alternately parched by drought and drowned in torrential rains. My people carve the names of our gods into the living skin of the tree, and the tree pours out its lifeblood. It hardens into a crystal that glows when it is ignited, releasing a fragrance like no other."

Bree had been prepared for her wager, and she drew a pouch out of the folds of her robe. Opening it, she poured several chunks of frankincense into her palm. "If the sultaan will permit?" She placed one of the crystals on the coals of the brazier kept near his seat to heat water for the ever-present mint tea.

The effect was immediate. A heady aroma wafted from the

glowing chunk, filling the room.

“That is a worthy prize for which to play,” Tahraz responded. “In the same spirit, I offer an object of great value as well. If you are the victor in this game, I will give you the first offspring of the mare Ashana and my stallion Maheer.”

Bree was stunned. She knew the importance Tahraz placed on his herd. Ashana would soon be in heat for the first time, and the women all talked of how eagerly Tahraz awaited the mating of the two. Would their foal have the speed of Maheer combined with Ashana’s fiery spirit? She bowed her head. “I accept your wager. It is truly a prize worthy of this contest between a sultaan and a queen.”

As they played, it became clear that Tahraz had used the days to practice his moves. It took every ounce of concentration Bree possessed to keep her mind ahead of his. When she won the game, Tahraz looked surprisingly pleased with the outcome.

“As is your right, you will now witness the mating, to insure that the offspring is truly from the stallion I promised.”

Bree had never seen the coupling of large animals, and she wasn’t prepared for the scene that played out under the stars. The corral was empty, save for Ashana. The mare was restless, tossing her head and prancing around.

Tahraz disappeared. When he returned, Bree didn’t need to turn her head to see that he led Maheer. Ashana’s reaction told her that. As soon as she caught scent of the stallion, the mare began tearing around the corral, seeking a way to get to him. For his part, the stallion could barely be restrained. It took all of Tahraz’s considerable strength to keep the horse from trampling the fence to get to her.

He opened the gate and set Maheer loose inside the corral. Then he went to Bree’s side.

“See how eagerly she greets him? And he, in turn, will have his way with her at last.” Tahraz kept up a commentary as the stallion mounted his mare. Bree watched the savage coupling, shocked at how much it aroused her. Tahraz narrated every move, every powerful thrust, describing the scene as though Maheer was an amorous young rake finally giving way to his uncontrollable lust for the tempting

virgin Ashana, who ached with her need for him.

When Tahraz drew her into his arms, Bree turned her face up for the kiss she knew was coming. Her clit throbbed, and a shiver ran through her when she felt the rigid shaft under his robes pressing against her body. Despite all her resolve, she found herself opening her lips as his tongue teasingly, insistently captured her mouth.

She heard a moan and realized it came from her. Summoning every ounce of her self-control, Bree put her hands against his chest, pushing him away.

She took a ragged breath before she spoke. "I believe the suiltaan is a man of honor, who keeps his word in all things. When this foal is born, if the gods are merciful, I will be back among my people, unable to take possession of it. But I thank you for the honor you have bestowed upon me, by offering me a prize of such value."

Tahraz released her then stalked off without a word. He stormed into his tent and, in two long strides, grabbed Na' Ima, yanking off her veil and forcing her to her knees in front of him. The woman complied eagerly, freeing his stiff rod and taking it in her mouth.

Bree turned away. But not before Tahraz glanced out the open flap of his tent – and caught her watching.

Chapter Eight

Several nights later, the suiltaan called her to his presence for another game. Bree was embarrassed to face him after he'd caught her peeking into his tent like a voyeur. She told herself what he did with the other women of the harem was none of her business.

But increasingly, she found Tahraz stealing into her dreams. The scenes where they walked hand in hand, laughing and talking as they had in the ruins of the city deep in the desert, were somehow more disturbing than those in which she knelt before him, trembling, and he took her as he had sworn to do.

When she walked in, she found herself alone with Tahraz. His musicians had been banished once again to entertain them from outside the tent. He began by serving her from a platter of lamb stewed with grains, offering her morsels from his fingers. Though she felt uncomfortable, Bree didn't know how to refuse without seeming rude. He asked her to give him a taste of the tiny purple berries on the platter, taking hold of her wrist when she brought her hand to his lips. Licking her honey-coated fingertips one by one then drawing them into his mouth.

A jolt of raw lust shot straight to her core. She tried to cover her intense reaction, but Tahraz smiled wickedly then sat back with an air of satisfaction that he'd gotten the response he wanted.

He brought up the evening's wager before the game began. "Tonight, if I am victorious, I desire a prize not for me, but for the future leaders of my people. You will teach this game to the young boys of the tribe, engaging them in play and revealing to them the secrets of mastery."

"I accept your proposal and I will counter with one of my own. If I am the victor in this evening's match, you will allow me to give lessons in this game to the young girls of your tribe as well."

Tahraz considered her proposal for a few moments, then smiled again. "Agreed."

When the game began, he went on the attack. Bree parried his

moves, but her head wasn't in the match. She kept thinking about his tongue licking her fingertips. Imagining how it would feel lashing her clit.

She'd won the first two matches and despite his growing mastery of the game she was sure the chances that Tahraz could take the next three were slim to none. If she won this match, the contest would be over. If he lost face so dramatically, his temper might get the best of him, and he wouldn't honor his promise to let her go. The evening's wager seemed harmless, so she deliberately made a move that would allow the sultaan to put her in check.

When she laid her king on its side, signaling defeat, Tahraz beamed. "Tomorrow you will come here after your midday rest. The boys will take turns, one playing against you as the others watch and learn. Later, they will engage each other in play, and you will observe." He gave her a sly grin. "You are, after all, a skilled observer."

Bree refused to meet his eyes. Had he set up this wager just so he could make that remark? Tahraz was a master at innuendoes. He would have been right at home amidst the palace intrigue of a Borgia during the Renaissance.

The next afternoon, when the sun hung low in the sky, Tahraz summoned Bree to his tent. Eight young boys sat solemnly in front of a low table where the board had been set up. She recognized several of them as the goatherds she'd met outside Bashar's tent.

Tahraz chose the first player. He was Suhailah's youngest brother Abdullah, the lad the woman had tried to protect by venturing into the hills alone to search for his missing lamb.

Bree spoke slowly, describing the game and the various pieces, using words she hoped the boys would understand. She wasn't surprised when Tahraz stayed in the room, keeping watch from his chaise. As boys will do, they forgot the admonishment they'd been given to be silent during the lesson. Before long, they were crowding around the board, whispering to each other, nudging and grinning when Abdullah captured one of Bree's pieces.

They settled into a routine. Every day Bree came to the suiltan's tent to give another lesson. The boys learned quickly. Soon they were engaging each other in matches while Bree coached. Tahraz put the women of the harem to work creating more chess sets so they could have several games going on at once. He never spoke, but she was aware of his eyes on her the entire time, listening intently and sizing up the board before every move.

As time went on, Bree kept the boys entertained by recounting a new tale during every lesson. She told them about great civilizations, replayed famous battles, shared with them the legends of Greek and Roman gods. The suiltan often had to chase the boys out of the tent as the stars were coming out.

One afternoon, Tahraz sent word that he was otherwise engaged and there would be no lesson that day. The women had just finished crafting a new chess set. "Teach us how this game is played," begged Ketifa. She was one of the youngest women in the harem, allowed to sing and dance but not yet called upon to entertain Tahraz in any other manner.

Dasheena was away, helping Bashar with dinner preparations. Without her there to weigh in, Bree decided there would be no harm in explaining the rules of the game to the bored women. There were only so many history lectures she could deliver. Perhaps her sisters could while away the hot afternoons using their minds another way. She sat down with Ketifa while the other women gathered around the board, listening intently.

They were nearing the end of their first practice match when Dasheena came back. "What are you doing?" she cried in horror.

"We're playing chess. Ketifa shows great promise. She grasped the basics of the game faster than most of the boys did."

"You must stop. The suiltan will be displeased. Females of our tribe are not allowed to engage in games of war."

"Ordinarily I would agree with that sentiment, but chess is primarily an exercise for the intellect," Bree replied. "Perhaps the suiltan will change his mind once he sees how talented Ketifa is."

Dasheena swept the pieces off the board. "Hush. We will not speak

of this again,” she whispered, glancing nervously at the doorway to the tent.

The following day when it was time for the afternoon lesson, the suiltan called for all the women of the harem to accompany Bree. When they arrived, the young boys were nowhere to be seen. Tahraz was once again pacing from one end of the huge tent to the other.

The women bowed before falling to their knees and sitting back on their heels.

“Dasheena, come forward.” His voice was cold as ice.

Bree could see Dasheena fighting back tears as she approached the suiltan.

“Were the women in my hareem playing the game of chess?”

“Yes, my lord,” she replied, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“You know it is forbidden for women to engage in games of combat.”

“Yes, my lord suiltan.”

“I trust you to keep order in the hareem, to rule your domain in the same manner as I rule. You have disobeyed me. Prepare yourself for punishment.”

Dasheena dropped to her knees immediately, with her head touching the floor. She put her arms behind her to pull up her robe. Before she could bare herself, Bree jumped to her feet.

“You cannot punish Dasheena. She did nothing wrong. I was the one who taught Ketifa to play. Dasheena knew nothing about it beforehand and made us stop when she found out.”

Tahraz acted surprised but Bree suspected he already knew that. “Indeed? And did you know it was forbidden to teach a woman such a game?”

“I knew you did not encourage it.”

“And yet you allowed yourself to be persuaded by Ketifa.”

Bree raised her head defiantly. She could not let either woman be disciplined for her impulsive act. “She did not persuade me. I was the one who suggested it.”

“Very well. Since you excel at observation, you will now observe the result of your rash decision.” He looked down at the waiting

woman crouched at his feet. “Dasheena, you will be disciplined for your failure to keep order in the hareem. And then you will bring Ketifa forth and administer her punishment yourself. Queen Bilquis, take a seat on the chaise.”

Bree took a deep breath, knowing what she had to do. “I will not allow these women to pay the consequences for my foolish choice,” she stated flatly. “If someone is to be punished, let it be me.”

Tahraz met her defiant stare calmly. “As you wish. I will have mercy this one time on Ketifa. But Dasheena will still be disciplined, for she has failed to instill the proper respect for my rules in the hareem. And when I am finished with Dasheena, you will receive the punishment you have requested.”

Bree watched helplessly as Dasheena, still on her knees with her bottom raised high in the air, bared her backside. Tahraz’s face was expressionless as his leather riding crop whistled through the air. Dasheena moaned, fighting to remain in place as he laid a pattern of angry red stripes on her backside and the tops of her thighs. Soon she was choking back sobs. But she never protested, never moved. Bree hoped when it was her turn, she could be as brave as Dasheena.

Tahraz delivered fifteen or twenty harsh swats before tossing aside the crop. Dasheena buried her head in the carpet, sobbing softly, but maintained her humiliating position.

The sultaan raised his head and met Bree’s eyes. Hoping her quaking legs would not collapse, she rose and started to kneel beside Dasheena. Tahraz stopped her. “You will lie across my lap on the chaise – as you did before.”

Bree’s stomach clenched. She remembered all too well her body’s treacherous response to the last spanking Tahraz gave her. Still, she dared not refuse, fearing Dasheena would once again bear the brunt of the sultaan’s displeasure. She wouldn’t meet his eyes as she stepped forward and draped herself awkwardly over his thighs.

Tahraz seemed intent on extending her humiliation as long as possible. He pulled her robe up slowly, running his hands over her bare legs. Then, when he’d raised the garment to her upper thighs, he shifted on the chaise so her feet were off the floor and her bottom

poked higher into the air.

He began spanking her over the robe, first on one cheek and then the other. Her body jerked with every swat, and it was all she could do not to cry out. The spanking hurt much more than the first one he delivered. She realized she must have been in a daze after her ordeal in the desert. This time there was no haze over her mind to dull the pain. He ignited a searing fire on her bottom with his very first whack. Every time his hand made contact, the flames burned hotter.

Tahraz stopped, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Then he slid his hands down to where her robe was bunched around her thighs. He took his time baring her, tucking the long robe up around her waist, running his hands over her naked ass. She forced herself to lie still and stoically endure it. But when his fingers dipped between her thighs, she couldn't stifle a gasp.

He took his hand away. "You are dismissed," he said, gesturing to the other women. "Dasheena, you will return later...when I send for you." Bree heard the rustling of skirts as the other women left the tent.

"Now, my haughty queen, your punishment will begin."

A stab of fear shot through her. How much worse could it be?

Her question was answered when his hand came down again. She was shocked at how much more intense the pain was without the robe covering her bottom. She cried out then clamped her lips together, vowing not to make another sound no matter what he did.

Tahraz thrashed her soundly, smacking her with a palm calloused by hours spent handling the reins of a half-wild stallion. Bree was in agony. When he paused, she had a fleeting hope her torment was finally over.

Then his hand spread her legs apart even farther. She thought he would once again dip his fingers into her pussy, as he did the first time she was in this position. But, to her shock and embarrassment, she felt an insistent finger test the tight pucker of her bottom hole.

Her entire body went rigid. She'd had only one serious lover, the professor who broke her heart and left her distrustful of men. There had been a few dalliances later with fellow students, but never had

she been touched *back there*. Bree had always hidden what she thought of as her shameful secret desires, choosing to study erotic acts rather than to experience them firsthand.

His finger was withdrawn, and Bree sagged against the chaise, only to squirm frantically when he slid the tip inside her. It penetrated her tight opening easily. Bree realized he must have stopped to coat his hand with some kind of oil. He began working his finger in, rubbing his thumb over her clit at the same time. She heard a low chuckle and forced herself to lie unmoving.

Her bottom was burning, but the pain only intensified the other sensations he was arousing. "There are many ways to punish a naughty queen," he said in a low voice that sent a shiver through her belly. "I can fan a flame elsewhere, leave you aching in other ways." He drove his finger deeper and despite her vow to stay still, Bree squirmed.

He shifted his legs, and Bree felt his cock under her, stiff with desire. He ignored his own need, intent on arousing her. Teasing, taunting, taking her higher and higher, but always stopping short. She found herself pumping her ass against his hand.

Tahraz laughed wickedly. "Is this what my queen demands?" he said, driving his finger deeper. She shuddered, and he drew it out then cupped her burning ass in his palm.

"Tomorrow night, we play again," he declared as he pulled her robe down. His hands lingered, stroking her back, before he helped her to her feet.

Chapter Nine

Bree left the tent, legs unsteady, every nerve ending awake and aroused.

She was angry with Tahraz but even more with herself. Her body had betrayed her once again. He'd teased and tormented her until she found herself shamelessly thrusting her ass up at him, begging for more of the humiliating treatment that made her ache with desire. Bree wanted nothing more than to hide from everyone until she got her emotions under control. But she had nowhere to go.

"I am so sorry, Dasheena." Back in the women's tent, Bree hurried to where the woman lay alone, curled up on one of the thick rugs that covered the floor. "I never meant to cause you any trouble." She stroked the woman's back and felt her trembling.

"I know what is expected of me. It was I who failed," Dasheena replied, her voice little more than a whisper.

"How can you excuse what he did?" Bree couldn't hide her disapproving tone.

"I displeased my suiltan. My punishment was deserved. He honored me, placed me in a position of authority – and I let him down. If I accept his trust, his kindness and affection, I must also accept his discipline."

Bree shook her head. "I don't understand."

"If the suiltan did not punish me for disobeying his commands, it would show he does not care about me. His actions, though harsh, demonstrate to the others that he holds me in high regard. Another man might banish me into the desert or have me whipped by one of his guards. Instead, Tahraz himself wielded the leather crop. Later, he will hold me and stroke my hair and tell me I am forgiven – and loved."

"It's a strange kind of love."

"Not so strange." Dasheena rolled over to face Bree. "In our tribe, men wield the power – but they also bear the burden of caring for their women and children. We know they will lay down their lives

willingly for us, brave any danger, bear any suffering to keep us safe and well...because we are loved. All they ask in return is our faithfulness and our obedience, that they may have peace and harmony within their own homes.”

Bree couldn't argue with the logic. Their primitive life was fraught with danger. The harsh climate, the wild creatures that still roamed the desert – she'd seen men who'd been scarred and crippled by them. But she'd never heard any shrill nagging women or couples arguing like they did back home. The members of this patriarchal society did seem to live in peace.

After her talk with Dasheena, Bree saw life in the desert tribe through different eyes. She watched two of the guards return from duty in the mountain pass, their women and children crowding around to welcome them home. She'd seen the harrowing trails they patrolled, felt the pitiless heat they endured while their families lived placidly in the oasis. Children laughing and playing in the cool grass, women weaving baskets in the shade or chattering as they tended the crops. *Maybe knowing they'll come home to this haven of tranquility is what drives these men to endure such brutal conditions over and over without complaint.*

Bree dreaded the hours to come. She didn't know how she could bear to face Tahraz after her embarrassing behavior while she lay draped across his lap. It was a relief when he sent word that the day's lesson was canceled.

When evening came, the two guards were invited to Tahraz's tent. They were joined by all the other men of the tribe. The meeting went on for hours. At first, all she heard was the hum of conversation. As the hours passed and the drink flowed, their tone became more boisterous. She fell asleep to the sound of deep voices joined in a rousing chorus.

“What was all that about last night?” She and Dasheena were fetching water from the well near a grove of date palms, helping Bashar with preparations for the morning meal.

Dasheena glanced around nervously before she answered. “The

guards discovered the remains of a camel slaughtered deep in the mountains. There were large tracks nearby, from a lion. They do not wish to alarm the women and children.”

Bree shuddered. She remembered Hassan charging at the lion with only a knife in his hands, then the sight of his limp body in the creature’s powerful jaws. “Are there many lions in the desert?”

“Long ago, tribes of lions roamed this area. But now, with desert taking over the land, they are very rare. The last lion seen near here was in the time of Tahraz’s great-grandfather. He managed to slay the beast but was crippled for life from the terrible wounds it inflicted on him.”

That night, Tahraz sent word that only Queen Bilquis was to attend the evening meal. She did her best not to meet his eyes as she entered the tent.

He never mentioned her punishment, making casual conversation as he ignored ritual once again and insisted they dine together. It wasn’t long before she found herself engaged in a spirited debate about the pros and cons of educating women.

“Who do you think will shape the early years of your heir one day?” Bree argued. “Would you have the young sultaan raised by someone who can speak only of cooking and weaving?”

“You were happy I learned the art of cooking at my mother’s knee when we camped alone in the lost city,” Tahraz countered playfully.

Bree smiled. “True enough. But think how good a chess player you would be today had she taught you the intricacies of the game while you waited for your meal to bake in the coals.”

“I will think on this matter,” he declared, ending the topic. “Speaking of chess, let us return to our contest. You have twice been the victor and I but once. It is time for me to even the score. What will you wager on tonight’s outcome?”

Perhaps it was the spirited verbal sparring they’d engaged in that made her answer so quickly. Bree found herself tossing out her answer without thinking it through first. “I want to return to a wager not yet collected. If I win tonight, you will allow me to teach the game of chess to the young girls of the tribe – including Ketifa.”

Tahraz's eyes narrowed. "Very well. I too will return to a wager not yet collected. If I win this contest, tomorrow night you will perform the ritual you promised to demonstrate if I won our first bout many nights ago. I want to see the fertility rite performed in the Great Temple by its high priestess, the Queen of Sheba."

Bree didn't see how she could refuse. She'd already put it forth once as a prize. Besides, he'd never seen the actual ceremony, so she could simply don a different robe and sing the song for him. There'd be no need to adorn her naked breasts with floral paintings or have slave girls bringing her to an embarrassingly intense climax to end the ritual as they did in Mahrib.

"Agreed." She smiled and settled down to play.

It was clear from the start this contest would be no easy victory. Tahraz had obviously been paying close attention to the finer points of the game while she taught the young boys. He came out hard, and Bree found herself being attacked on every front. She was a reasonable chess player but certainly no grand master, and she suddenly realized the student was about to surpass the teacher.

"I spoke with Na' Ima about your homeland," Tahraz tossed in as she studied the board. "Elders in her tribe traveled to Mahrib long ago. They have seen the glories of your Great Temple. One of them even attended the fertility rite performed by a high priestess known as Rahina. Was she perhaps your mother?"

Bree nodded, unwilling to trust her voice. He knew something of the ceremony.

"Na' Ima remembered the elders describing in great detail the way the high priestess was adorned. They said her face was veiled but she performed the ceremony naked – save for tiny jeweled birds clipped to her painted nipples and a skirt of fabric so sheer as to be translucent. I look forward with great pleasure to witnessing such a sight."

Bree nearly choked on the sweet date she'd been nibbling. She'd had trouble concentrating before. Now it was all she could do to keep her mind on the game.

She recovered from one stupid mistake, but when she left herself

open a second time, Tahraz seized the opportunity. "Check," he announced gleefully. "In truth, I believe it is checkmate."

Bree bowed her head. "It is," she admitted. "Well played, my lord suiltaan."

"The score is even, and we have one match yet to play." Tahraz swept the remaining pieces off the board. He laid each one in the silver box then picked it up to study the explicit etchings of figures enjoying every sort of erotic pleasure imaginable. "But before we play again, you will honor your wager."

He rose and bowed politely. "Until tomorrow, Queen of Sheba."

Normally time passed slowly under the hot desert sun, but the next day the hours flew by. Bree met with the musicians and taught them the simple but haunting melody of the hymn. The drummer learned his part quickly, beating out the primitive rhythm, sending her mind whirling back to that bizarre night.

Soon the time drew near for Bree to reenact the ceremony. She dug through her saddlebags and found a flask of the special scented oil. Putting it aside along with pots of henna and kohl, she enlisted Dasheena and Na' Ima to help her prepare for the evening. She bathed and then rubbed the oil all over her body. With trembling hands, she cinched the jewel-studded gold belt around her hips and fastened the long gossamer skirt to it. She slipped her feet into delicate sandals trimmed with gold.

She had no bright paint to draw the hibiscus flowers on her breasts. Na' Ima improvised, swirling on kohl in an elaborate design then mixing henna with the scented oil to stain her nipples a deep red. Dasheena outlined her eyes and shaded them with more kohl. The stark black stood out on her light skin. Dasheena said it made her brown eyes look enormous.

Bree unpacked the jeweled hummingbirds last. She tweaked her nipples till they stood out, biting back a cry when Na' Ima clipped a tiny bird onto each hard peak. Finally, Dasheena helped her slip into a deep purple robe that concealed her entire body, covering her face and hair with a matching veil that left only her kohl-rimmed eyes

exposed.

Tahraz was in rare form when the women entered his tent. He laughed and joked with the musicians and praised Bashar's culinary skills when the old man presented their evening meal. He treated Bree as an honored guest, gesturing for her to sit by his side. Once again he chose tasty morsels from the platter, feeding her with his own hand. She moved her veil aside just enough for his fingers to place them in her mouth.

Finally, Tahraz could no longer conceal his impatience. He ordered the musicians out. Then he turned to Dasheena. "Take the women away."

The musicians took their places outside the tent. Bree heard the drummer first, slowly beating out the rhythm. She took a pouch of frankincense from her robes and tossed a handful of the crystals onto the brazier. Almost at once, their pungent aroma filled the tent. A haze of smoke rose and began spreading on unseen currents of air.

Tahraz gave her a solemn nod. "We are alone, my queen. You may begin."

Bree walked slowly to the center of the tent. The fragrant oil infused with intoxicating herbs was once again doing its job, permeating her skin to send shivers of arousal racing through her body. When the lyre and the flute joined the drums, she was transported back to the night she first laid eyes on the Great Temple of Mahrib and experienced the raw power of its ancient rite.

She met Tahraz's gaze, her eyes never leaving his as she slipped the robe off her shoulders and let it fall to the ground. He watched the robe drop, then leisurely scanned her half-naked body from head to toe. His eyes lingered on the design painted on her bare breasts, the twin hummingbirds clipped to her puckered nipples.

"Is it not the custom for the high priestess to have her arms bound, outstretched, as she stands on the altar?"

"It is."

He walked to one of the wooden poles holding up the roof. Bree saw he'd tied a narrow strip of cloth to the top of the pole. He wrapped the free end around her wrist and pulled it tight. Then he did

the same to her other wrist, leaving her standing before him, unable to move, wearing only a veil over her face and a nearly transparent skirt with a slit in the front nearly up to her waist.

“I am told the temple is home to both male and female attendants – and that they and many of the worshippers are unclothed as they participate in your holy ritual.”

“That is true.”

“Then I will abide by your custom.”

He slid his robe off, allowing it to fall to the ground as Bree had done. Under it, he was naked. His powerful body gleamed in the flickering light of clay lamps placed around the room. Already fully erect, his cock jutted out proudly. She found herself longing to touch it. To taste it. To hear him groan with a hunger as raw as the shameless desires he aroused in her.

Arms bound, stretched wide apart, she held her head high and began chanting the ancient hymn. As she sang, Tahraz came close, so close his iron-hard cock grazed her belly as he swayed his hips to the music. Her voice gained strength, and she sang once again in the ancient language, sang of fertile fields and bountiful rivers teeming with life. She sang of seductive women and lustful men, of raw passion and the endless pleasure they found in each other’s arms.

As her song neared its end, Tahraz pulled aside the veil covering her face. He reached for the goatskin flask, took a long drink, then bent his head and kissed her. Under his seductive pressure, she parted her lips. Thick honey-sweet liqueur trickled into her mouth.

She swallowed instinctively, then gasped as a trail of liquid fire ran down her throat. With all her senses heightened, Bree swore she could feel the potent drink pouring through her veins, igniting the inflamed nerve endings of her nipples and pooling in the hot wet channel between her thighs. He gave her a little more. Bree drank it then darted her tongue into his mouth, dancing with his to the cadence of the drum.

Still deep in the kiss, Tahraz began caressing her breasts. When he unclipped one of the hummingbirds and bent his head to suck on the engorged nipple, Bree let out a strangled cry. She tossed her head

from side to side, overwhelmed by a wave of ecstasy overriding the pain. When he took the bird off her other nipple and drew it into his mouth, her strangled cry turned into a rough moan.

Tahraz sank to his knees. She longed to twine her fingers in his hair. But the cloth binding her wrists held fast, and she could only watch...and feel. Feel his hands stroking up the insides of her thighs, feel his tongue following the path his hands traced until it reached her throbbing clit.

Bree shuddered. He looked up and smiled that devastating smile then spread her apart with the fingers of both hands. She felt his tongue again, then his mouth closed over the swollen nub and he started licking and sucking it the way he'd sucked her nipples. Her rough moans became breathless wordless cries. He drove her higher, never stopping until she let out a wild scream. Only then did he rise and take her in his arms. His tongue claimed her mouth, hot and hard.

When at last he ended the kiss, Bree was left shuddering in his arms. He drew back and smiled again. "I thank you, Queen of Sheba, for that demonstration of the secret rite of your holy temple. The men of Mahrib are indeed blessed to live in a kingdom that has such wonders in store for them."

To her amazement, Tahraz slipped on his robe and stepped away to untie the ropes holding her. When she was free, he bent and picked up her robe, drawing it over her head and letting it fall to the ground to cover her. He bowed once again, took her hand, and led her to the doorway.

When she came to her senses, Bree found herself outside. Alone in the darkness, under the vast star-laden sky, her body quivering with savage hunger.

Chapter Ten

During the next few days, Bree replayed the evening over and over in her mind.

She'd been certain Tahraz would require her to satisfy him as he had done to her. When he ushered her out of his tent, she waited for the summons the next night, and the night after that. But his self-control was as rigid as his cock had been. He treated her no differently than he had before. If anything, he was more formal, using the less familiar forms of his language when he addressed her, requiring that the boys treat her with even more respect during their lessons.

Her mind was in a whirl, but there was no mistaking what her body wanted. She was grateful for the veil that covered her face while in his presence, since she could feel her cheeks flush every time he glanced at her.

When his attention was elsewhere she stared at his hands. Imagined them running up the insides of her thighs while she stood before him, arms bound, unable to move. Unable to stop him from touching her wherever he wanted. When he spoke she watched his lips, longing to feel them capturing her mouth, then traveling down her body, licking and sucking until she screamed.

And every night, she dreamed about him. Sometimes she took his stiff rod in her mouth, teasing and tormenting him until she had the satisfaction of making him lose control as he had done to her. In other dreams, he stopped her, rolling her onto her back and holding himself over her body with those powerful arms. Then, gazing into her eyes, he'd ram his cock deep inside her.

Every morning she woke to an aching hunger that continued to grow. Sometimes she wondered if her existence as Dr. Sabrina Dennison had been the hallucination and this life the reality.

The suiltan had won her respect by the care and concern he showed for his tribe. Over time he'd won her heart. She sensed the caring behind the firm control he held over his people, much like the gentleness she'd seen him show with his horses. Although she didn't

know much about animals, it seemed to Bree that Ashana followed his lead not out of fear or coercion, but because she found pleasure in pleasing him. *Just as Dasheena did.*

* * *

As for Tahraz, he knew he was lost. Whenever she was near him, it was sheer will that kept him from seizing her and taking her at last. The other women of his harem would happily do whatever he desired. At first he turned to them for release after those nights where he tortured himself being with Bilquis but not allowing himself to have her. When that did not ease his hunger, he began sleeping alone.

From the first time he laid eyes on her, he'd been determined this defiant woman, this arrogant queen, would come to him willingly...or not at all.

But over time the idea of winning, whether at the game of chess or the game of seduction, became less important. His captive queen was like no other woman he had ever known. He watched her constantly, delighting in the animation on her face as she repeated his tales of their ancestors to the women, making each story spring to life. He saw the joy she felt when one of the boys grasped a complicated chess lesson.

No one could be more proud in defeat than Bilquis, praising one of her young conquerors as she conceded a game to him. The boys in turn were as entranced by her as he was, transported through her stories to strange, wonderful lands where valiant heroes had wild adventures and romanced sensuous – and always intelligent – heroines. Her love of knowledge was matched only by her desire to share that knowledge with another keen mind. As the days passed, Tahraz realized he was in love with Bilquis the woman, hungering for that special connection with her mind and her soul as deeply as he lusted for her body.

Finally the day came when Tahraz was ready to risk it all. He sent word to Queen Bilquis, telling her to prepare herself for the last game of their tournament.

* * *

Bree was torn. If she won the evening's game, she was certain

Tahraz would honor his promise and allow her to leave. Back in Mahrib, she would be treated as royalty. She had a retinue of slaves and servants at her beck and call, a life of wealth and leisure. But she had a duty to her people as well. She would be expected to marry a stranger, a man not of her choosing, and give birth to a female child to carry on the roles of monarch and high priestess.

Here, in this isolated oasis, she'd made friends. For the first time in her life, she wasn't the aloof professor or the shy scholar, more comfortable with her books than with people. And for the first time, her heart was drawn to a man from whom she felt respect along with the intense physical attraction.

He acknowledged her skills and admired her knowledge. Rather than seeing her as a threat or a pawn he could use to advance his own reputation, Tahraz had given her an opportunity to shine. She loved teaching the boys. Through her lessons, she could influence their minds, shape the tribe's future. She knew Tahraz had been listening and learning as well. He'd begun seeking her opinion from time to time before making decisions that governed the tribe.

Bree dressed with care, listening as her sisters prepared for the evening but not joining in the gossip and laughter. Before leaving their tent, the women surrounded her, wishing her luck in this, her final game, while expressing sadness at the thought she might leave them.

"Surely Mahrib cannot be better than this," Dasheena said. "You have fine garments and beautiful jewels there, slaves to care for your every need. But here you have all the bounty the gods can bestow... and a handsome virile sultaan to care for you."

"You're right, Dasheena. This hidden al ain is a paradise. And in truth, Mahrib is not my real home. I come from a place much farther away – and much stranger – than you could ever imagine."

"Then you must stay and tell us tales of that distant land, as you have told us tales of Mahrib and of the lost city of our ancestors. We love you as a sister, Bilquis. Can you not give up this contest with the sultaan and remain here?"

Bree didn't answer. She'd been asking herself that question for

days. But as much as she loved Tahraz, she couldn't live like this, sharing him with the other women. He often sent for Na' Ima or Dasheena or one of the others after spending an evening with her. Maybe it was selfish, but she wanted a man who loved her so much he didn't want anyone else.

If she couldn't have Tahraz all to herself, she'd rather be alone... and far away. Bree knew she couldn't give in and make love with him, even for a single night. It would make hungering for him while knowing he was with another too painful to bear.

She could feel his gaze the moment she entered the tent, but she refused to meet his eyes. Dinner was a solemn occasion. Both of them tried to pretend it was just another evening but the atmosphere felt strained.

Bree was relieved when he sent everyone away and began arranging the pieces on the board. She was sure she would win. He'd become a reasonably good chess player, but she'd already won two games. As for the games she'd given up to him – one loss had been deliberate and one due to a careless mistake she was determined not to repeat.

Tonight, her mind would be on the game. She'd be leaving this place, if not in the morning then within a day or two. At least the heartache she felt whenever she was around him would be over.

* * *

Tahraz was anxious as well, but he did his best not to show it. He had a strategy far more complex than he'd used in any of their matches. On this final night of their tournament, Bilquis would see just how well she had taught him. Mentally he rehearsed the final move he had planned. With it, he would win her – or lose her forever.

There was no musical accompaniment from outside the tent. No spirited debate between them. Only silence as they began the match.

When he captured the first pawn, Tahraz spoke. "It has been my honor to engage with you in this contest, Queen Bilquis. I have learned much from these games – as I have learned much from our conversations."

"Thank you, my lord sultaan," she replied. "I, too, have been

honored to spend this time becoming acquainted with you – and with my sisters in the hareem.”

Tahraz frowned. He could scarcely rebuke her, but he was disappointed to be put in the same category as his women. He debated the wisdom of ending this charade and turning her over his knee to spank her into submission, thrashing her until she tearfully admitted she wanted him as much as he wanted her. With any other female, he would already have done it.

Curses be to the gods. Look what she's done to you. Filled your head with these strange notions of men and women coming together as equals, both in games of skill and games of the heart. If she wins and goes back to Mahrib, at least you'll be rid of her. She'll be out of your sight and out of your fantasies.

But never out of my heart.

It took admitting the truth to silence his raging cock. With Bilquis, he wanted something he'd never had before. He wanted her to choose him, freely and openly, without coercion or fear.

Tahraz played as he had never played before, determined to be the victor.

* * *

Bree fought. She brought all her skill and knowledge to the table, along with her insight into the sultaan's personality. Still, he surprised her. Too late, she realized he'd been sandbagging in the last two games. He'd become a much better player than he let on.

She moved then saw the trap. There was no escape, nowhere to run. In two moves, he'd take her queen then corner the king. Hands shaking, Bree laid the piece on its side, signaling surrender, and bowed her head.

Tahraz came around the table and knelt in front of her. He took her face in his hands.

“Queen Bilquis, as the victor of our contest, I release you from your wager. It has been both a joy and an honor to spend time with you. Getting to know you as a fellow ruler, learning from you, having you share your customs and beliefs with me and my people.

“It would be wrong of me to demand that so worthy an opponent

forfeit something as priceless as her freedom over the outcome of a few evenings of entertainment. You are no longer my captive. You have earned the right to be treated as my honored guest. You may leave whenever you want. My guards will escort you safely back to your land, and you may choose a companion from my hareem to accompany you on your journey.”

Bree stared at him in shock. She’d been prepared to hear him gloat, part of her hoping she could block out her love for him with anger. Instead he’d done something incredibly sensitive.

For the first time in her life, Bree shoved logic and reason aside and followed her heart. *I might suffer the pain, the loss, for as long as I live – but I’ll have one night of pure ecstasy no one can ever take away.*

She pulled off her veil. “My lord suiltan, you have proven yourself a man of honor. Your generous offer is deeply appreciated. I will leave this place with sadness in my heart, for I have grown to love this al ain...and its people. But I, too, am an honorable person. You won our contest fairly. If you will grant me time to prepare, on this, my last night here, it would bring me great joy to kneel before you willingly and submit to whatever my lord desires.”

She knelt in the required position – legs spread wide apart, hands clasped behind her back, upper body bent forward till her forehead rested on the thick carpet. Every secret of her most private parts was exposed – to be viewed, to be fondled, to be violated. Her luxurious mane of dark hair was loose, flowing in waves down her back and curling over her shoulders to veil her face.

The air was filled with the heady perfume of incense, and she could see the clay oil lamps flickering through a thin haze of smoke. Somewhere in the distance, a lone drummer began a strange, compelling rhythm. The drumbeat grew louder, as one by one other tribesmen joined in.

She could feel the vibrations, raw passion seeping into her soul as the tempo quickened. She was shaking all over, but not from cold, although she was nearly naked. She dared not move. He would come very soon, she was sure. This was the night he’d been anticipating –

preparing her for ever so patiently, even at times ruthlessly, over the long hot days and endless nights...

It was all she could have imagined – and more. Tahraz entered the tent, moving softly as a panther. She felt him draw near, felt his hot breath on her neck. He swept aside the thick mane of hair flowing down her back.

Kisses rained down her spine. She moaned when the kisses continued, traveling down the cleft between her rear cheeks. Tongue followed lips. Sucking, licking, delicately teasing all the places he'd boldly explored on the nights when she'd been lying helpless over his lap.

Bree felt helpless again, Helpless to resist. He moved slowly, drawing out every thrilling sensation. She felt the hard length of him, rubbing against the lips of her pussy until she thought she could bear it no longer. She rocked her hips back, trying to draw him in, but he backed away.

"No, please. Please don't stop," she moaned.

He lifted her in his powerful arms and laid her on the padded chaise. "I do not plan to stop, my queen," he declared. "You have given yourself to me this night, and I, in turn, give myself to you."

Tahraz moved over her, locked his eyes on hers – and thrust deep. Her scream was muffled by his kiss as he took her mouth with savage hunger. Outside, the drums kept up their primitive beat. She met every stroke, drawing him in as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

It was everything she had dreamed.

Their lovemaking went on for hours. Tahraz was insatiable. He took her first one way, then another. Bree came again and again, each thrilling orgasm a prologue to the next. He took her higher than she'd ever been before.

Finally, the sultaan gave up his iron control. He roared as hot jets of cum spurted out, bathing her inner walls and triggering one last soul-shattering climax.

Later, cradled in the his arms with her head resting on his chest, Bree confessed how long she'd secretly hungered for this night. Later still, she knelt over him with a naughty smile. He watched her, his piercing blue eyes dark with lust, struggling to remain still as her fingers and her tongue traced a path down his chest.

When at last she drew him into her mouth, he gave a low groan and buried his hands in her hair. The pleasure she felt at bringing him such pleasure filled her heart to bursting.

They dozed and woke again, still twined in each other's arms. As the faint light of dawn crept over the horizon, Bree slipped out of bed and went outside. She wanted a few minutes alone to bid goodbye to this place – and to the love she would leave here.

She walked along the placid shores of the oasis, staying clear of the marshy area with its tangle of reeds and water hyacinths. Too well, she remembered her first morning and the crocodile hiding in the shallows. A rustling in the tall bushes surrounding the marsh made her turn her head.

A lion stood motionless at the edge of the clearing, less than a hundred yards away.

Bree stifled a scream. Time stopped. Scenes flashed through her head – mangled bodies dragged away while still alive, massive jaws ripping into Hassan. She remembered a lecture she heard once about how to survive an attack by a bear. The speaker said to play dead. She had no idea if that would work with a lion. But it didn't matter. She was frozen, unable to fall on the ground and curl into a fetal position. Unable to make a sound.

“Do not move.”

The whispered command came from her left. Bree kept her head still and swiveled her eyes. Tahraz stood at the door of his tent, stark naked, a huge spear in his hand.

“If you run, the beast will attack. When I give a shout, drop to the ground.”

She nodded, a barely perceptible inclination of her head, but enough to let Tahraz know she had heard him.

With a bloodcurdling yell, Tahraz raced at the lion. The huge

creature roared and charged straight for him, covering yards with every stride. Bree threw herself down, then watched in horror as the lion sprang. Tahraz stopped dead, planting the spear in front of him. The creature flew through the air, bellowing as it impaled itself. Momentum carried the lion forward, knocking Tahraz over. Man and beast crumpled to the ground in a heap.

“Tahraz!” Terrified, Bree jumped up and ran toward him. He was covered in blood, trying to pull himself out from under the enormous body. At first, she thought all the blood came from the lion. Then she saw the gaping wound in his chest, where the animal’s vicious claws had ripped away his flesh as it was dying. She sank to her knees, cradling his head in her lap, and burst into tears.

Tahraz stretched out his hand and brushed away a teardrop running down her cheek. “Bilquis, Queen of Sheba, I have fallen hopelessly in love with you. My heart is heavy at the thought of facing each day without you by my side. Will you be my suiltaana? Will you stay with me here in the al ain as we rule this land together?”

“Yes, oh yes,” she sobbed. “I love you Tahraz. I would be proud to be your suiltaana. I’ll never leave you. You’re going to live a long life. After I nurse you back to health, we’ll ride together again across the desert to the ancient city. We’ll walk hand in hand through the silent streets at twilight. You’ll tell me all the tales again – and then we’ll make love under the stars.”

He brought her hand to his lips. “May the gods be merciful and grant us a long life together.”

Bree closed her eyes. And still the tears fell.

Epilogue

The silence grew. Became oppressive.

Finally, Reid broke it. “Go on. What happened next?”

Kiera shook her head. “I...I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” He sounded frustrated.

“Why didn’t you look into your crystal ball or ask your spirit guides or do whatever it is you do to tap into these past lives you claim we’ve lived?”

She couldn’t tell him the truth. That she’d broken her fragile bond with the past on purpose. That for the first time she was afraid to look any deeper into the past – because she couldn’t bear to see him die in her arms.

Kiera gazed into his piercing blue eyes and shrugged. “Sometimes it happens. I lose the connection.” She forced a laugh. “Like when the Internet goes down. Except there’s nobody I can call to come and fix it.”

* * *

Her laugh sounded brittle, and Reid could see tears welling up in her eyes. He wanted to kick himself. She always tried so hard to be strong, keeping his spirits up, never giving in to anger or depression. The least he could do was stop being a selfish asshole for once. Quit taking and start giving.

He lifted himself out of his chair and onto the bed then held out his arms. “Come here.”

She shook her head no and turned away. Probably so he wouldn’t catch her crying.

“I said come here.” He lowered his voice. Put a bite in his tone. “Did you learn nothing from your last punishment, Queen Bilquis? When your suiltan gives a command, you obey.”

She swiped a hand across her eyes and climbed up on the bed beside him, keeping her head tilted down. “Yes, my lord.”

“No, not there. I want you right here in front of me. On your knees.”

“Sorry, babe. I’m not really into this tonight.”

He yanked her across his lap, face down, and gave her ass two stern swats. “Are you refusing your suiltaan?”

“N-no, my lord.”

“Then get on your knees. Now.”

He positioned her so she was straddling his body with her knees on either side of his thighs. “If you can’t remember what happened next, I guess I’ll have to show you.”

Reid released the clasp on her jeweled halter, freeing her breasts. “Bilquis nursed her suiltaan back to health, just as she promised she would.” Cupping her breasts, he tweaked one nipple with his fingers and thumb.

Her body responded instantly to his touch. The nipple tightened, forming a little peak. He pinched it lightly. “And every night while he was recovering from his injury, he would command her to kneel over him and lift up the hem of her gown.”

A tiny smile formed on her lips, and she pulled her long skirt up to her waist.

Reid gave a low groan. “God, you’re beautiful.” The sight of his wife’s pussy still made him as horny as a teenager about to get laid for the first time. He slipped a finger between her legs. “And you’re already wet. But I know how to get you a whole lot wetter.”

Grabbing the cheeks of her ass with both hands, he pulled her closer, until her pussy was inches away from his face. Then he leaned forward and flicked his tongue across her clit. Keira squealed and bucked.

He gave her ass a sharp swat. “Did I say you could move?” he growled. When she didn’t answer immediately, he smacked her again and heard her gasp. “Did I?”

“No, my lord.”

“Then you stay in this position until I finish the story.” He slid one finger into her pussy then bent his head and licked her clit. Keira moaned, and her body quivered, but she didn’t move. He lashed her clit till it swelled and grew hard then fastened his lips over it and sucked.

Kiera screamed, fisting her hands in his hair. He rammed a second finger into her pussy, fucking her with them while he licked and sucked. She rocked her hips up, keening and moaning.

Reid bent his fingers slightly and stroked her sweet spot. Her pussy spasmed, and she exploded, crying out his name. But he knew his woman. She was just getting started.

He rubbed his other hand over the lips of her pussy, coating it with her slick juices, then locked his arm around her hip and started working a finger into her ass. Kiera shuddered and threw her head back. Reid brought her to a second shattering orgasm then commanded her to come for him once more before she collapsed, breathless, on top of him.

* * *

Carefully, Kiera lifted her head. Her husband was asleep, and she didn't want to wake him. They'd dozed off together, her head pillowed on Reid's chest, his arms locked around her as if he'd never let her go.

With a fingertip, she lightly traced the scar. The bullet's exit had torn open the front of his chest, leaving a jagged wound, almost like the claw mark of a wild beast. Unlike Tahraz, Reid survived his injury.

But if there was one thing she'd learned over the centuries, it was that life held no guarantees. So, instead of cursing their fate, she'd take this night gratefully.

Reid opened his eyes. His arms tightened around her, and he smiled. "Good morning, my queen."

Keira stared into those incredible blue eyes, filled with love. The eyes she'd seen centuries ago on the suiltan. Hope stirred in her heart. Was it possible? Could Tahraz have survived his terrible injury to found a desert dynasty with Bilquis, Queen of Sheba?

If Bilquis could nurse her beloved back to health in their primitive world, then there's a chance I can too. Not only can I tap into the knowledge of the ages, I can call on all the tools of modern medicine.

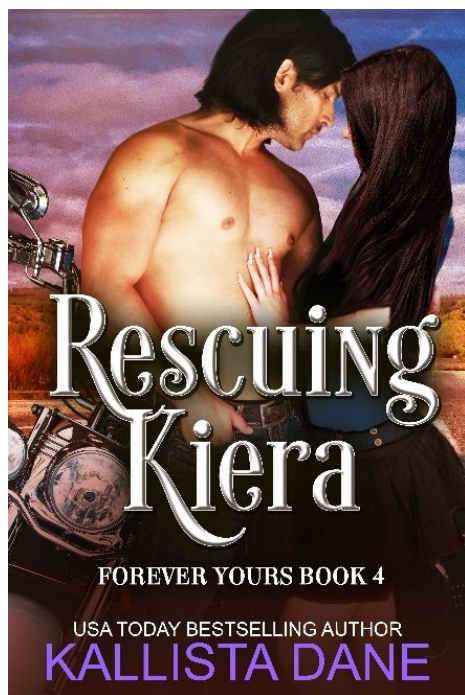
The truth about Tahraz and his queen was out there, lying hidden in the sands, waiting to be uncovered one day. Perhaps another Bree and her future suiltan would find it when they played the age-old game of seduction.

Kiera had no compulsion to dig for the answer. Her husband, her best friend, her forever love was here with her. Now. Today. She smiled back at Reid. “Good morning, my lord.”

Maybe the gods will be merciful once again, she thought as she leaned in to kiss him, *and our love will live on to share a long life together.*

And as many more as the universe would grant them.

An Excerpt from Rescuing Keira



Rescuing Keira
A Paranormal Fantasy Romance
Forever Yours Book 4

**I couldn't bear to be touched -
until a stranger with piercing blue eyes reached out and took my
hand**

My psychic abilities have always been more of a curse than a blessing. If I hug a friend or brush up against someone in a crowd, images pour into my head. I know her new guy abused his last girlfriend. And that nice old man? His wife will die next week.

I've learned not to share most of what I see. People can't handle it. Carrying the weight of those secrets can be a crushing burden. So I keep everyone at a distance. Especially men. I've never slow danced, never let a guy kiss me. As for sex – forget it.

But the day my truck broke down and I got fired from my job, a hot guy in tight jeans and a leather jacket offered me a ride. I looked into his deep blue eyes and felt like I'd known him forever. So I took his hand and climbed on the back of his Harley.

Because I have other visions too. Visions of people I've never touched, people I don't even know. Like the little girl with curly blonde hair locked in the basement of a farmhouse in the North Carolina mountains. She's crying for her mommy. No one knows where she is – except me.

I'm determined to rescue her. He doesn't know it yet, but Reid, the sexy biker, is going to help. I've had visions about him too. Visions of him stripping me naked. Touching me everywhere with his hands, his lips...

I'm sorry. Here I am, telling you all this, and we haven't even been properly introduced.
My name is Keira.

Rescuing Keira is Book 4 in Forever Yours, the steamy paranormal time travel romance series by USA Today bestselling author Kallista Dane. Every book is a stand-alone adventure with a guaranteed HEA. If you've read any of the other books in the series, you've already met Keira and Reid. It's time to tell you their story.

Prologue

Kiera lit a candle scented with her special blend of essential oils.

“Alexa, play my meditation music.”

“Playing best of 80s rock anthems,” the flat female voice announced.

The opening bars of Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Wanna Miss a Thing” filled the room. She smiled. Sometimes Alexa had her own opinion of what Keira needed to hear.

She opened the scarred old mahogany box brimming with an array of crystals and stones on the corner of her desk and took out the first item she touched. A flat black stone worn to a smooth oval by eons of rushing water. It fit perfectly in the palm of her hand.

Fingering the stone, she closed her eyes.

Night had fallen, but the flagstone path under her feet still captured the warmth of the sun.

The melody around her changed, morphing into a low chant, accompanied by a strangely compelling drumbeat. Though the words were in an unfamiliar tongue, her body responded to the primitive beat, swaying to the rhythm as she headed down the path.

Ahead stood an ancient stone building framed by the gnarled trunks of old-fashioned climbing roses.

She ran her palm over the weathered wooden panels of the door then opened it and stepped over the threshold.

Ornate candlesticks tall as her shoulders lined the entryway. The room beyond glowed with soft light. She heard the faint rustling of wings and glanced up at the dome soaring above her head but saw nothing.

The vast chamber was empty, save for a heavy wooden table and chair under the center of the dome. Wooden shelves filled with row upon row of fragile scrolls lined the walls.

She circled the room, gently touching them at random. As she did, images poured into her head, accompanied by snatches of long-

forgotten melodies and the faint scent of exotic spices.

But tonight she didn't need to whisper an invocation and choose a scroll to read. She held the most precious memory of all in the palm of her hand.

* * *

Kiera sauntered into the bedroom wearing a long-sleeved white shirt tucked into a pair of black work pants. Instead of sky-high stiletto heels, she had on a pair of black ballet flats.

Reid raised an eyebrow. "Not your usual attire for story hour."

She sank down on a leather stool at his feet. "But it's perfect for tonight."

She'd put aside her red lipstick for a warm shade of coral and pulled her long dark hair back from her face, twisting it into a severe bun at the back of her neck. It only accented her sculpted cheekbones and deep-brown eyes.

He saw her austere outfit as a challenge. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of freeing her long wavy locks then burying his hands in them so he could tug her head down between his legs and order those coral lips to open wide for his cock.

He shot her a wicked grin. "I like where you're going with this. I don't think we ever played secretly slutty librarian and horny college guy before."

She laughed. "Don't you remember? This is the outfit I was wearing the day we met."

He gazed at her as though seeing her for the first time. God, she was beautiful, this woman of his. Back then she'd been young and sweet. Innocently charming. But to Reid, his wife of twenty years was sexier and more desirable now than on the day he'd first laid eyes on her.

For most of those years, she kept dark secrets from him, hungers she'd never dared to confess. Only recently, through the stories she wove, had she begun to expose her most wicked desires. He found this hidden side to the woman he thought he knew so well enthralling. Inside her lived a brazen temptress with hot fantasies – dirty fantasies that got his cock hard. Sometimes only the thought of these nights

gave him the strength to go on.

Reid wasn't sure if Kiera truly was uncovering memories of past lives they'd spent together or whether weaving naughty tales of love and lust gave her the courage to be honest at last about her sexual needs. To him, it didn't matter. All he knew was that he loved the new Kiera more and more every day, loved the freedom her honesty had given both of them. After listening to one of her erotic adventures, he'd find a way to bring it to life, satisfying needs neither of them had ever dared to admit.

It took years for her to open up but he'd finally learned Kiera's most shameful secret. She hungered for the thrill of submitting to a stern alpha male. And Reid was determined to give his woman what she desperately craved.

He remembered exactly what she'd been wearing the day they met. When she finished tonight's tale, he'd command her to bend over his lap. He'd pull down her tailored black pants and uncover the skimpy lace panties she'd have on underneath.

After warming her bottom with half-a-dozen firm swats, he'd yank the panties down around her knees.

Then he'd spank her bare ass while telling her exactly how she would be required to please him tonight. She'd squirm on his lap, grinding against the bulge in his pants. He could almost hear her low throaty moan when he ordered her to spread her legs. He'd dip a finger into the wet heat between her thighs while warning her she'd better do a good job of pleasuring him...or he'd punish her.

"I vaguely remember that day," he lied. He didn't want to deny her the pleasure of weaving one of her wickedly arousing tales. "We were sitting next to each other at a bar in Asheville listening to the band that used to open for Aerosmith. I said I hated rock anthems. You said you loved them."

Keira was shaking her head.

"No? Are you sure? Okay, then tell me. How *did* we meet?"

Chapter One

1997

Kiera squeezed by booth 11, narrowly avoiding the grubby hand that reached out to grab her as she balanced a tray of drinks on one hip.

“You are just too cute,” she said, smiling down at him. “Someday you’re going to be a real heartbreaker.”

The toddler grinned at her and grabbed a handful of mashed potatoes and gravy, squishing the food all over the tray of his high chair. Mom was settling an argument between his older sisters over whose turn it was to put money in the vintage juke box and barely looked up as Kiera delivered a fresh iced tea.

That was a close one. Kiera breathed a sigh of relief as she headed back to the kitchen for another order. The child had almost touched her bare hand.

The job was exhausting but most of her customers gave her decent tips. *I’ve got to hang in here for a couple of weeks longer, just till I can save up enough to pay for that new transmission.*

Business was brisk, and Kiera hustled from table to table. She’d learned that roadside diners were a good place to pick up some cash. Staff turnover in the restaurant business was high. An attractive young woman willing to refill endless cups of coffee and still maintain a cheerful smile for her customer could always find a job in the mountains during the busy tourist season.

A blast of hot air hit her back as the door opened. She turned and caught a glimpse of a tall male in tight jeans and a dusty leather jacket heading for table 3 by the window. Keira grabbed a menu and made her way down the aisle.

“Hi there,” she said, setting the menu and roll of silverware in front of him. “Welcome to Billy Ray’s Diner. Can I get you a nice cold drink?”

The stranger looked up. Kiera felt a jolt of electricity shoot through her as his deep-blue eyes met hers.

The diner disappeared. Dressed in an expensive dark suit, he leaned back in a leather chair at the head of the table in a crowded conference room.

She blinked, and the image faded, leaving her staring at a hot hunk with wavy dark hair down to his collar and two days' growth of beard, wearing a Rolling Stones T-shirt under the worn biker jacket.

"You can start with a big glass of water and keep 'em coming." His voice was low and husky. "Kinda hot out there for this early in the season, isn't it?"

"I'm not from around here, so I really don't know."

Keira hardly knew what she was saying. The vision had been shockingly clear. Normally, she had to have physical contact with people to read them, but just looking into this stranger's eyes triggered an image with incredible detail. She could even describe the view out the window behind him in the conference room. A steep hill lined with a rainbow of Victorian "painted ladies" leading down to a bay, the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance.

She shook her head and put on her "customer" smile, hoping he wouldn't notice how badly her hands were shaking. "I'll be right back with that water and then I'll tell you about today's specials.

"I've got to pull myself together," she muttered as she headed for the waitress station.

As the old saying went, her ability was both a blessing and a curse. She shied away from getting too close to anyone. Casually brushing against an elderly lady on a crowded street could send her whirling into a hospital room, listening to the desperate prayers her devoted husband would whisper a week later.

She'd never had a vision about someone right in front of her without some kind of skin-to-skin contact. That's why she always dressed modestly, sleeves buttoned to the wrist even in the heat of summer. But under her long sleeves and sensible work pants was a lush body hungering for the caresses other women took for granted.

Keira knew one more "incident" would cost her this job. And she had to get the car fixed and get to Waynesville soon. Whatever was to going to happen, it would be while the peach trees were in bloom.

She didn't doubt her visions anymore. She'd seen them become reality too many times. Those were peach blossoms on the trees behind the old farmhouse she saw – the farmhouse in Waynesville where a little girl with curly blonde hair was being dragged into the root cellar, screaming for her mommy.

* * *

Reid couldn't take his eyes off her hips swaying seductively as she walked away from his table. He'd met plenty of women he thought were hot. But he'd never experienced anything like the reaction he had to the warm smile and cute little ass of his waitress. Staring into her warm brown eyes, he'd felt an instant connection – straight to his cock.

"Down, boy," he muttered to the bulge in his suddenly too-tight jeans. Reid's sex life had been nonexistent for too long. He'd had no time for a relationship, or even a casual pickup, when every waking moment was spent negotiating the sale of Virtual Victors.

For years, he'd been just another computer nerd, days blending into nights as he hunched over his keyboard creating the popular video games that blended virtual reality with extreme sports. Now he had enough money to experience all the expensive hobbies his characters enjoyed – sports a boy raised by a cash-strapped single mom could never afford.

Yesterday, he'd helped her move into a waterfront condo in Boca, then headed north on the brand-new Harley parked outside the diner. Both purchases were made possible by years of living like a monk in a cramped studio apartment in San Francisco while he worked to secure a future for himself and the woman who had given up everything for him. Reid was finally free to live the kind of adventure-filled life he'd been creating for his characters since he was a kid.

The cute waitress came back with his ice water. As she set the glass in front of him, he reached for it, brushing against her fingers. She gasped and pulled her hand away, knocking the glass off the table. The crash as it shattered on the tile floor shocked everyone in the room to silence.

* * *

She shivered under the ice-cold waterfall cascading over an outcropping of moss-covered rocks. Her nipples jutted out, tight little peaks. But Kiera didn't know whether it was from the chilly torrent of water pouring over them or the bold hands of the naked man in front of her, teasing and tweaking them then bending his head to lick everywhere he'd touched.

Billy Ray's harsh voice brought her back to reality. "How many more of my customers are you gonna drive away with your daydreamin' and carelessness?"

"I'm sorry, mister," he growled, striding out from the kitchen. "She does this all the time. Did you get cut by the glass? Dinner's on me – and you're outta here," he snapped, turning to Kiera. "I can't afford to keep payin' for dinners and dry cleanin' every time you go off into yer own little world."

Keira didn't blame him. Ever since Daddy passed, she'd tried to hold down a succession of jobs. But the visions she'd been seeing since she was a little girl were uncontrollable – and so very real. Each time, she was transported somewhere far away, and the world around her ceased to exist. Often the scenes played out before her were gut-wrenching. When it was over, she was left shaking, her head pounding uncontrollably.

Keira's Irish grandmother had been born with the gift, too. But Gran lived a quiet life back in the bayou. She could take to her bed after one of her "spells." When Keira was a child, Gran's patient teaching and comforting presence helped her cope with the problems her unusual abilities created.

But Gran had been gone for years. With satellite TV and high-speed Internet available in the most remote corner of the bayou, technology brought home the grim reality of Keira's psychic abilities. Too often, Keira watched helplessly as her latest doom-laden vision came to life before her eyes on cable news at 3 a.m.

When Daddy was alive, they lived in a cozy cabin tucked away on a back road deep in the bayou. Keira took over Gran's role in the backwoods community while she was still in high school. Women

came to her to learn the sex of their unborn child or for advice about a new boyfriend. Sometimes, instead of advice, they got a warning about their beau. Her best friend Lydia ignored the warning. Keira still missed her every day.

Then Daddy died, too, and she had to sell the cabin to pay his medical bills. But he left her his old Ford and a few thousand dollars he'd managed to squirrel away in a savings account with her name on it.

Keira packed up the few possessions that mattered to her and hit the road, promising herself the next time she had a premonition, she'd go to the place she saw and do something to change the outcome. So far, three people owed her their lives...but they would never know it.

Daddy's meager inheritance didn't last long on the road, and Kiera had to take odd jobs along the way just to get by. Now the Ford was sitting at Ernie's service station down the road. The bill for repairs would chew up every dime she had.

Keira turned to her boss, her stomach clenching in fear. There weren't any other jobs she could get to from her cheap weekly rental without transportation. "Please, Billy Ray," she said in a low voice. "Let me stay. Just until my truck gets fixed."

* * *

Reid took one look at her stricken face and pulled the burly owner aside. "There's no need to fire her. It was just ice water – no harm done. Besides it was really my fault. I knocked it out of her hand." He dug a crumpled wad of bills out of his pocket. "Here. Let me pay you for the glass."

Billy Ray crossed his arms over his belly and shook his head. "It wasn't your doin'. I warned that girl if it happened again, she was through. Last time she dropped a whole dinner in somebody's lap. Afterward, she walked around all pale, lookin' like she was gonna faint and scared everybody else. I can't afford to get sued if she dumps a pot of hot coffee on somebody's head when she's havin' one of her spells."

Reid didn't know what drove him to say the next words that came out of his mouth. It just – felt right. He turned to the young woman.

“If you’re outta here, so am I.” He put out his hand. “My name’s Reid. Reid Dalton. I heard you say your truck is out of commission. That’s my Harley out front. Can I offer you a ride somewhere? I’m heading through the Nantahala Gorge to Waynesville.”

She stared at his hand warily, then transferred her gaze to his eyes. Whatever she saw in them must have reassured her.

“Thank you. I’d appreciate it.” She took a deep breath and wrapped her fingers around his. “Pleased to meet you, Reid. I’m Keira.”